

# CHARLES BUKOWSKI

NEW POEMS

THE PEOPLE LOOK  
LIKE FLOWERS AT LAST





the  
people look  
like flowers  
at last

new poems

**CHARLES  
BUKOWSKI**

EDITED BY JOHN MARTIN



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one

the heart roars like a lion  
at what they've done to us.



## for they had things to say

the canaries were there, and the lemon tree  
and the old woman with warts;  
and I was there, a child  
and I touched the piano keys  
as they talked—  
but not too loudly  
for they had things to say,  
the three of them;  
and I watched them cover the canaries at night  
with flour sacks:  
“so they can sleep, my dear.”

I played the piano quietly  
one note at a time,  
the canaries under their sacks,  
and there were pepper trees,  
pepper trees brushing the roof like rain  
and hanging outside the windows  
like green rain,  
and they talked, the three of them  
sitting in a warm night’s semicircle,  
and the keys were black and white  
and responded to my fingers  
like the locked-in magic  
of a waiting, grown-up world;  
and now they’re gone, the three of them  
and I am old:  
pirate feet have trod  
the clean-thatched floors  
of my soul,  
and the canaries sing no more.

## evening class, 20 years later

the hungry tug of too late;  
webs of needles,  
the same trees are here;  
and grass grown on grass  
but the faces now are young  
and as you walk across the campus thinking  
“memory is a poor excuse for the present”  
the legs want to let the body fall as  
old images cling to you like mollusks  
and the girls now gone who once  
claimed your substance  
hang like broken shades  
across the windows of your mind;

—at one time here  
everything was mine—

now young lions claim the territory  
and look out casually  
over loose paws  
and decide  
mercifully  
to let this poor game crawl by. he, of course,  
no match for the young lionesses,  
or the Spring in the early sky.

at one time here—  
once—

I enter a room and stand against a wall  
and hear my name read, and  
no, it is not the same:

my old professor looked like a walrus  
as he spit my name out  
into the spittoon of the world  
and I said, HERE! while  
feeling the sun run down  
thru the hair of my head  
like wires feeding life into life:  
white rain, sea wild;

but this new one whispers my name (and it is dark);  
and like a claw reaching down into some pit of me,  
surrounded by walls like tombs I answer meekly,  
here,

and he moves on to another name.

I am older than he  
and certainly not as fortunate  
as the lionesses curl at his feet and purr delightedly,  
and one gray old cat  
twists its neck  
and asks me: have you been here before?

yes, yes, yes, yes  
I have  
been here  
before.

## the snow of Italy

over my radio now  
comes the sound of a truly mad organ,  
I can see some monk  
drunk in a cellar  
mind gone or found,  
talking to God in a different way;  
I see candles and this man has a red beard  
as God has a red beard;  
it is snowing, it is Italy, it is cold  
and the bread is hard  
and there is no butter,  
only wine  
wine in purple bottles  
with giraffe necks,  
and now the organ rises, again,  
he violates it,  
he plays it like a madman,  
there is blood and spit in his beard,  
he wants to laugh but there isn't time,  
the sun is going out,  
then his fingers slow,  
now there is exhaustion and the dream,  
yes, even holiness,  
man going to man,  
to the mountain, the elephant, the star,  
and a candle falls  
but continues to burn upon its side,  
a wax puddle shining in the eyes  
of my red monk,  
there is moss on the walls  
and the stain of thought and failure and  
waiting,

then again the music comes like hungry tigers,  
and he laughs,  
it is a child's laugh, an idiot's laugh,  
laughing at nothing,  
the only laugh that understands,  
he holds the keys down  
like stopping everything  
and the room blooms with madness,  
and then he stops, stops,  
and sits, the candles burning,  
one up, one down,  
the snow of Italy is all that's left,  
it is over: the essence and the pattern.  
I watch as  
he pinches out the candles with his fingers,  
wincing near the outer edge of each eye  
and the room is dark  
as everything has always been.

## **near a plate glass window**

dogs and angels are not  
very far apart.

I often go to this little place  
to eat  
about 2:30 in the afternoon  
because all the people who eat  
there are completely sane,  
glad to be simply alive and  
eating their food  
near a plate glass window  
which welcomes the sun  
but doesn't let the cars and  
the sidewalks come inside.

across the street is a Chinese  
nudie bar  
already open at 2:30 in the  
afternoon.  
it is painted an  
inane and helpless  
blue.

we are allowed as many free  
coffees as we can drink  
and we all sit and quietly drink  
the strong black coffee.

it is good to be sitting some place  
in public at 2:30 in the afternoon  
without getting the flesh ripped from  
your bones.

nobody bothers us.  
we bother nobody.

angels and dogs are not  
very far apart  
at 2:30 in the afternoon.

I have my favorite table  
by the window  
and after I have finished  
I stack the plates, saucers,  
the cup, the silverware, etc.  
neatly  
in one easy pile—  
my offering to the  
elderly waitress—  
food and time  
untorn,  
and that bastard sun  
out there  
working good  
all up and  
down.

## beef tongue

I hadn't eaten for a couple of days  
and I had mentioned that several times  
and I was up at this poet's place  
where a tiny woman took care of him.  
he was a big bearded ox with a brain twice as large as the  
world, and we'd been up all night  
listening to tapes, talking, smoking, swallowing pills.  
his woman had gone to bed hours ago.  
it was 10 a.m.  
and the sunlight came on in not caring that we hadn't slept  
and the next thing I knew  
he was coming out of the kitchen  
saying, "hey, Chinaski! LOOK!"  
I couldn't see clearly—  
at first it looked like a yellow boot filled with water  
then it looked like a fish without a head  
and then it looked like an elephant's cock,  
and then he brought it closer:  
"beef tongue! beef tongue!"  
he held it out at arm's length  
right in my face:  
"BEEF TONGUE! BEEF TONGUE!"  
and it *was*, and I never imagined a steer's tongue was that  
fat and long,  
it was a rape,  
they had gone deep into the creature's throat  
and hacked it out, and here it was now:  
"BEEF TONGUE!"  
and it was yellow and pink  
and  
it was gagging all by itself

just another reasonable and sensible atrocity  
committed by intelligent men.

I was not an intelligent man. I  
made it to the sink and began to  
heave.

stupid, of course, stupid, it was only dead meat,  
no feeling now, the pain long since run out of the bottom of the  
world

but I continued to vomit, finished, cleaned up the sink  
and walked back  
in. "sorry," I said.

"it's o.k., I forgot about your stomach."  
then he walked the tongue back into the kitchen  
and then came out and we talked of this and that  
and in about ten minutes

I heard the water boiling and I smelled the tongue cooking  
in that bubbling water without mouth or eye  
or name, it was a huge tongue going around and around  
under that lid  
and stinking  
becoming cooked tongue  
becoming most delicious and flavored  
but since he was an agreeable fellow  
I asked him please to turn it off.

it was a cold morning and as I shivered in the doorway  
as I got ready to leave  
the new air was good  
I could feel the legs the heart the lungs  
beginning to envision another chance.

we talked about a book of poems he was helping me edit, then I said "goodbye, keep in touch," and we didn't shake hands, a thing neither of us liked to do

and I went up the path and out to my car and started the engine and as I warmed it up I imagined him moving back into the kitchen behind that mass of black beard, those blue diamond eyes shining out of all that *black* hair

those intelligent happy blue diamond eyes knowing everything (almost), and then turning the flame on again

the water beginning to shift and simmer

the tongue moving around in there once again.

and I, stupid in my machine, turned away from the curb, let it roll through the yellow morning, down around the curves and dips, all that green growing nicely along the side of the road.

well,  
thank Christ he hadn't invited me to stay to dinner. when I got home I thumbed through some Renoir, Pissarro and Diaz prints. then I ate a hard-boiled egg.

## the 1930s

places to hunt  
places to hide are  
getting harder to find, and pet  
canaries and goldfish too, did you notice  
that?

I remember when pool halls were pool halls  
not just tables in  
bars;

and I remember when neighborhood women  
used to cook pots of beef stew for their  
unemployed husbands  
when their bellies were sick with  
fear;

and I remember when kids used to watch the rain  
for hours and  
would fight to the end over a pet  
rat; and

I remember when the boxers were all Jewish and Irish  
and never gave you a  
bad fight; and when the biplanes flew so low you  
could see the pilot's face and goggles;  
and when one ice cream bar in ten had a free coupon in-  
side; and when for 3 cents you could buy enough candy  
to make you sick  
or last a whole

afternoon; and when the people in the neighborhood raised  
chickens in their backyards; and when we'd stuff a 5 cent  
toy auto full of  
candle wax to make it last  
forever; and when we built our own kites and scooters;  
and I remember  
when our parents fought

(you could hear them for blocks)  
and they fought for hours, screaming blood-death curses  
and the cops never  
came.

places to hunt and places to hide,  
they're just not around  
anymore. I remember when  
each 4th lot was vacant and overgrown, and the landlord  
only got his rent  
when you had  
it, and each day was clear and good and each moment was  
full of promise.

## people as flowers

such singing's going on in the  
streets—

the people look like flowers  
at last

the police have turned in their  
badges

the army has shredded its uniforms and  
weapons. there isn't any need for  
jails or newspapers or madhouses or  
locks on the doors.

a woman rushes through my door.

TAKE ME! LOVE ME!  
she screams.

she's as beautiful as a cigar  
after a steak dinner. I  
take her.

but after she leaves  
I feel odd  
I lock the door  
go to the desk and take the pistol  
from the drawer. it has its own sense of  
love.  
LOVE! LOVE! LOVE! the crowd sings in the  
streets.

I fire through the window  
glass cutting my face and  
arms. I get a 12-year-old boy

an old man with a beard  
and a lovely young girl something like a  
lilac.

the crowd stops singing to  
look at me.  
I stand in the broken window  
the blood on my  
face.

“this,” I yell at them, “is in defense of the  
poverty of self and in defense of the freedom  
*not to love!*”

“leave him alone,” somebody says,  
“he is insane, he has lived the bad life for  
too long.”

I walk into the kitchen  
sit down and pour a  
glass of whiskey.

I decide that the only definition of  
Truth (which changes)  
is that it is that thing or act or  
belief which the crowd  
rejects.

there is a pounding at my  
door. it is the same woman again.  
she is as beautiful as finding a  
fat green frog in the  
garden.

I have 2 bullets left and  
use them  
both.

nothing in the air but  
clouds. nothing in the air but  
rain. each man's life too short to  
find meaning and  
all the books almost a  
waste.

I sit and listen to them  
singing  
I sit and listen to  
them.

## acceptance

16 years old  
during the Depression  
I'd come home  
and my possessions—  
shorts, shirts, stockings,  
suitcase and many pages  
of short stories—  
would be thrown out on the  
front lawn and about the  
street.

my mother would be  
waiting behind a tree:  
“Henry, Henry, don’t  
go in . . . he’ll  
kill you, he’s read  
your stories.  
please take  
this . . . and  
find yourself a room.”

but since it worried him  
that I might not  
finish high school  
I’d go back  
again.

one evening he walked in  
holding  
one of my short stories  
(which I had never shown  
him)

and he said, "this is  
a great short story!"  
and I said, "o.k."  
and he handed it back to me  
and I read it:  
and it was a story about  
a rich man  
who'd had a terrible fight with  
his wife and had  
gone out into the night  
for a cup of coffee  
and had sat and studied  
the waitress and the spoons  
and forks and the  
salt and pepper shakers  
and the neon sign  
in the window  
and wondered about it all,  
and then he went  
to his stable  
to see and touch his  
favorite horse  
who then  
for no reason  
kicked him in the head  
and killed him.

somewhere  
the story had some  
meaning for him  
though  
when I wrote it

I had no idea  
what I was  
writing about.

so I told him,  
“o.k., old man, you can  
have it.”

and he took it  
and walked out  
and closed the door and  
I guess that's  
as close  
as we ever got.

## life at the P.O.

I huddle in front of this maze  
of little wooden boxes  
poking in small cards and letters  
addressed to nonexistent  
lives  
while the whole town celebrates  
and fucks in the street and sings  
with the birds.  
I stand under a small electric light  
and send messages to a dead Garcia,  
and I am old enough to die  
(I have always been old enough to die)  
as I stand before this wooden maze  
and feed its voiceless hunger;  
this is my job, my rent, my whore, my shoes,  
the leeching of the color from my eyes;  
master, damn you, you've found me,  
my mouth puckered,  
my hands shriveled against my  
red-spotted sunless chest;  
the street is so hard, at least  
give me the rest I have paid a life for,  
and when the Hawk comes  
I will meet him halfway,  
we will embrace where the wallpaper is torn  
where the rain came in.  
now I stand before wood and numbers,  
I stand before a graveyard of eyes and mouths  
of heads hollowed out for shadows,  
and shadows enter  
like mice and look out at me.

I poke in cards and letters with secret numbers as  
agents cut the wires and test my heartbeat,  
listen for sanity  
or cheer or love, and finding none,  
satisfied, they leave;  
flick, flick, flick, I stand before the wooden maze  
and my soul faints  
and beyond the maze is a window  
with sounds, grass, walking, towers, dogs,  
but here I stand and here I stay,  
sending cards noted with my own demise;  
and I am sick with caring: go away, everything,  
and send fire.

## **the minute**

“I am always fighting for the next minute,” I tell my wife.  
then she begins to tell me how mistaken I am.  
wives have a way of not believing what their husbands tell them.

the minute is a very sacred thing.  
I have fought for each one since my childhood.  
I continue to fight for each one.  
I have never been bored or at a loss what to do next.  
even when I do nothing,  
I am utilizing my time.

why people must go to amusement parks or movies or sit in front of tv sets or work crossword puzzles or go to picnics or visit relatives or travel or do most of the things they do is beyond me. they mutilate minutes, hours, days, lifetimes.

they have no idea of how  
precious is a  
minute.

I fight to realize the essence  
of my time.

this doesn't mean that  
I can't relax  
and take an hour off  
but it must be  
my choosing.

to fight for each minute is to  
fight for what is possible within  
yourself,  
so that your life and your death  
will not be like  
theirs.

be not like them  
and you will  
survive.

minute by  
minute.

## **too near the slaughterhouse**

I live too near the slaughterhouse.  
what do you expect? silver blood  
like Chatterton's? the darkness of my hours  
allows no practiced foresight.  
I hear the branches snap and break  
like ravens in a quarrel,  
and see my mother in her coffin  
not moving  
quietly not moving  
as I light a cigarette  
or drink a glass of water  
or do anything ignominious.  
what do you want?  
that I should feel  
deceived?

(the green of the weeds in  
the sun  
is all we have  
it's all we really have.)

I say let the monkeys dance,  
let the monkeys dance  
in the light of God.  
I live too near the  
slaughterhouse  
and am ill  
with thriving.

## a future congressman

in the men's room at the  
track  
this boy of about  
7 or 8 years old  
came out of a stall  
and the man  
waiting for him  
(probably his  
father)  
asked,  
“what did you do with the  
racing program?  
I gave it to you  
to keep.”  
“no,” said the boy,  
“I ain’t seen it! I don’t  
have it!”

they walked off and  
I went into the stall  
because it was the only one  
available  
and there  
in the toilet  
was the  
program.

I tried to flush  
the program  
away  
but it just swam  
sluggishly about

and  
remained.

I got out of  
there and found  
another  
empty stall.

that boy was ready  
for his life to come.  
he would undoubtedly  
be highly successful,  
the lying little  
prick.

## stranger in a strange city

I had just arrived  
in another strange city  
and I had left my room and  
found myself walking along  
on what must have been  
a main thoroughfare where  
the autos ran back and  
forth with what seemed to be  
a definite  
purpose.  
that busy boulevard seemed to  
stretch away endless  
before me and  
appeared to run  
straight off to the edge of  
the earth,  
and then  
after walking awhile  
I realized  
that I was  
lost, that  
I had forgotten the name  
of the street my  
room was on  
or  
where it was.

there was nothing back  
in that room  
but a week's paid  
rent  
plus a battered

suitcase  
full of my old clothes  
but it was  
everything I  
possessed  
so I began searching  
the side streets  
looking for  
my room  
and I soon became  
frightened, a  
numb terror like a fatal  
illness  
spreading through me  
as  
I kept walking  
up and down unfamiliar  
streets  
until my mind  
said to me:  
you're crazy, that's  
all, you should  
give up and turn  
yourself in  
somewhere.

but I just kept walking.

it had been a  
long afternoon and now  
it was slipping  
into evening.

my feet ached  
in my cheap  
shoes.

then it grew  
dark, now it was night,  
but I just kept  
walking.

it felt as if  
I had walked  
up and down through  
the same streets  
over and over.

then finally  
I recognized my  
building!  
and I ran  
up the steps  
and up the interior  
stairway to  
the 2nd floor  
and my room was still  
there and I  
opened the door,  
closed it behind me,  
and was  
safely inside.

there was the  
suitcase

on the floor,  
still full of my  
old clothing.

I heard a man  
laugh  
in one of the other  
rooms and I suddenly  
felt a lot  
better.

I took off my shoes,  
shirt, pants,  
sat down on the edge  
of the bed and  
rolled a  
cigarette.  
then I leaned back against  
the pillow and  
smoked.

I was 20 years old  
and had 14 dollars  
in my wallet.

then I remembered  
my wine bottle.  
I pulled it out  
from under the  
bed, uncapped it  
and had a good  
hit.

I decided that I  
wasn't crazy.

I picked a newspaper up  
off the floor  
and turned to the  
HELP WANTED section:

dishwasher, shipping  
clerk, stock boy,  
night watchman . . .

I threw the paper down  
on the floor.  
I'd look for a  
job  
day after  
tomorrow.

then I put the  
cigarette out  
satisfied  
and went to  
sleep.

## just another wino

the kid was 20, had been on the road  
5 or 6 years and he sat on the couch  
drinking my beer, his name was Red,  
and he talked about the road:

“these 2 guys were trying to treat me  
nice, keep me quiet, because I’d seen them kill a  
guy.”

“kill a guy? how?”

“with a rock.”

“what for?”

“he had his wallet, a good  
wallet, and 7 dollars. he was a wino. he was  
drunk and they hit him with the rock,  
knocked out his brains.”

“you saw it?”

“I saw it. the next time the train stopped  
they dumped him out, they dumped him in some  
high grass. then the train started up  
again.”

I gave the kid another beer.

“when the police find those guys in rags, no  
identification, wine-faced, they say ‘just another wino,’  
they don’t even follow up, they just  
forget it.”

we talked most of the night  
about the road. I told him a few stories of my  
own. then I went to bed. he slept on the  
couch. I went into the bedroom with the woman and  
kid. slept.

when I got up to piss in the morning  
Red was sitting in a chair  
reading yesterday's paper.  
“I gotta go,” he said, “I can't sleep  
anymore, but I had a good night, some good  
talk. thanks.”  
“me too, Red. easy now.”  
“sure.”  
then he was out the door and down the street,  
gone.

back in the bedroom she asked, “is Red gone?”  
“yeah.”  
“where'd he go?”  
“I don't know. Texas. Hell. Boston. anywhere.”  
the little girl woke  
up: “I wanna bottle!”  
“can you get her a bottle? you're up.”  
“sure.”

I went into the kitchen and mixed some  
milk. and everywhere things were working out there,  
cruel and not cruel, spiders and bums  
and soldiers and gamblers and madmen and  
factotums and fags and firemen, like that,  
and I went back in and handed the girl the bottle  
got back into bed  
and listened to the kid sucking on the thing—  
suck suck suck,  
and soon we'd have our own  
breakfast.

## it is not much

I suppose like others  
I have come through fire and sword,  
love gone wrong,  
head-on crashes, drunk at sea,  
and I have listened to the simple sound of water running  
in tubs  
and wished to drown  
but simply couldn't bear the others  
carrying my body down three flights of stairs  
to the round mouths of curious biddies;  
the psyche has been burned  
and left us senseless,  
the world has been darker than lights-out  
in a closet full of hungry bats,  
and the whiskey and wine entered our veins  
when blood was too weak to carry on;  
and it will happen to others,  
and our few good times will be rare  
because we have a critical sense  
and are not easy to fool with laughter;  
small gnats crawl our screen  
but we see through  
to a wasted landscape  
and let them have their moment;  
we only asked for leopards to guard  
our thinning dreams.  
I once lay in a  
white hospital  
for the dying and the dying  
self, where some god pissed a rain of  
reason to make things grow  
only to die, where on my knees

I prayed for LIGHT,  
I prayed for l\*i\*g\*h\*t,  
and praying  
crawled like a blind slug into the  
web  
where threads of wind stuck against my mind  
and I died of pity  
for Man, for myself,  
on a cross without nails,  
watching in fear as  
the pig belches in his sty, farts,  
blinks and eats.

## the bull

I did not know  
that the Mexicans  
did this:  
the bull  
had been brave  
and now  
they dragged him  
dead  
around the ring  
by his  
tail,  
a brave bull  
dead,  
but not just any bull,  
this was a special  
bull,  
and to me  
a special  
lesson learned . . .  
and although Brahms  
stole his First from Beethoven's  
9th  
and although  
the bull  
was dead,  
his head and his horns and  
his intestines dead,  
he had been better than  
Brahms,  
as good as  
Beethoven,

and

as we walked out  
the sound and meaning  
of him

kept crawling up my arms  
and although people jostled me and  
stepped on my toes  
the bull burned within me

my candle of  
light;

dragged by his tail

he had nothing to do with anything  
now having escaped it all,

and down through the long tunnel, surrounded by  
elbows and feet and eyes, I prayed for Tijuana  
and for the dead bull  
and man

and me,  
the blue kissing waters

enjoying the knot of pain,  
and I clenched my hands

deep within my  
pockets, seized darkness  
and moved on.

## the people, no

startling! such determination in the  
dull and uninspired  
and the copyists.  
they never lose the fierce gratitude  
for their uneventfulness,  
nor do they forget to laugh  
at the wit of slugs;  
as a study in diluted senses  
they'd make any pharaoh  
cough up his beans;  
in music they prefer the monotony of  
dripping faucets;  
in love and sex they prefer each other  
and therefore compound the  
problem;  
the energy with which they propel their  
uselessness  
(without any self-doubt)  
toward worthless goals  
is as magnificent as  
cow shit.  
they produce novels, children, death,  
freeways, cities, wars, wealth, poverty, politicians  
and total areas of grandiose waste;  
it's as if the whole world is wrapped in dirty  
bandages.

it's best to take walks late at  
night.  
it's best to do your business only on  
Mondays and  
Tuesdays.

it's best to sit in a small room  
with the shades down  
and  
wait.

the strongest men are the fewest  
and the strongest women die alone  
too.

## **you might as well kiss your ass goodbye**

I finally met him. he sat in an old robe  
and bitched for 5 hours.

“look,” he said, “don’t trust Krause,  
Krause will rob you. he owes me 10,000 dollars  
and there’s no way I can get it out  
of him. a real bastard.”

“Sir,” I said, “when you wrote that first novel,  
it was so humorous, the truth is always so funny,  
you know, the way people act, like blind mechanical things,  
killing without reason, marvelous how you got it all  
down.”

an old woman came in and set a pot of tea in front of  
him. “they smashed my motorcycle, stole my manuscripts,  
cleaned me out. they would have killed me but I wasn’t  
here. they called me a fascist, claimed I sold the plans  
to the Maginot Line to the Krauts. now where the hell would I ever  
get the plans to the Maginot  
Line?”

he poured his tea. lifted the cup. it was too hot  
or something. he spit it out on the rug, some of it  
on my shoes and pants.

“Sir,” I asked, “that first novel, did you really eat your own  
flesh as a young writer? were you that  
hungry? by god, that was some novel, I’ll never  
forget it!”

“Martha!” he called. “Martha!”

the old woman came in.

“you forgot the lemon and sugar, you old hag!”

the old woman ran out  
for the lemon and sugar.

“the government claims I owe them 70,000 dollars! they don’t bother  
Krause. the son-of-a-bitch rides around in a Cadillac and owns a twelve  
acre estate. don’t ever trust Krause. he’s a bloodsucker. he’s sucked  
the bodies and talents of at least 3 dozen writers dry. he’s like a giant  
spider, a tarantula!”

“Krause has never asked me for anything . . .”

“if he does, you might as well kiss your ass  
goodbye!”

Martha ran in with the lemon and sugar.

“you damned washed-up whore! I oughta whip your ass!”

“Sir,” I said, “you’re looked up to  
as one of the strongest writers since 1900.”

“don’t trust Krause! a bloodsucker!”

he bitched for 5 hours. and I listened. then his head fell back,  
across the top of his rocker, and I saw that  
famous hawk profile. then he began  
to snore.

he was just an old man in an old  
bathrobe.

I stood up. Martha came in.

"I'm glad I had a chance to meet him,"  
I told her.

"I try to remember he was once a great writer,"  
she told me.

"he's still kind of humorous,"  
I told her.

"I don't think so," she said,  
"you see, I'm his  
wife."

"goodnight," I  
said.

"goodnight," she  
replied.

## purple glow

I see the high-heeled  
shoes and a dried white rose  
lying on the bar  
like a clenched  
fist.

whiskey makes the heart beat faster  
but it sure doesn't help the  
mind and isn't it funny how you can ache just  
from the deadly drone of  
existence?

I see this  
nudie dancer running along the top of  
the bar  
shaking what she thinks is  
magic  
with all those faces staring  
up from overpriced  
drinks.

and me? being there? no shit,  
I really didn't care about  
her but I love the pulse of  
the loud flat music thumping  
in the purple glow, some-  
thing about it all: I hardly  
ever felt better.

I watch her, the purple  
doll so  
sad so cheap so  
sad, you would never want to

bed down with her or even hear her  
speak, yet in that drunken place  
you would  
like to hand your heart to her  
and say  
touch it  
but then  
give it back.

she dances so fiercely now in  
the purple glow,

purple does something strange to me:  
there was a night  
30 years ago  
I was drunk, true, and there was  
a purple Christ in a glass box  
outside a little church and I  
smashed the glass, I broke  
the glass, and then I reached in and touched  
Christ but  
He was only a dummy and I heard the  
sirens then and started  
running.

well, my mind has never been the same  
since and the typing helps but you can't  
type all the time, so the nudie dancer now  
breaks what heart I have left and I  
don't know why but I start giving money  
to everybody in the bar, I give a five to this  
guy, a ten to that, I think maybe it might

wake them to the wisdom  
of it all  
but they don't even say  
"thanks," they just think I'm a  
fool.

the manager comes up and tells me  
I'm 86'd, I hand him a  
twenty, he takes  
it.

two friends  
have been sitting at a back  
table, they help me up and out of the  
bar.  
I think the situation is very  
funny but they are  
angry:

where's your car?

where's your fucking  
car?

I say, I  
dunno.

too fucking bad, they  
say and  
leave me sitting alone on an  
apartment house  
step.

I light up and smoke a cigarette,  
then get up and begin the long  
walk, a walk I know will  
entail at least a couple of  
hours  
to find my car (past experience)  
but I know that when I  
find it, the rush of  
happiness will be  
all I need  
and that I will then be able to  
begin my life all over  
again.

## **one thousand dollars**

all of my knowledge about horse racing  
told me that this was a sure bet.

I bet one thousand to win.  
the horse had post one  
at 6 furlongs.

the bell rang and they came  
out of the gate.

my horse turned left  
ran through the fence  
fell down and  
died  
right there  
at 7/5.

when I tell people this story  
they don't say  
anything.

sometimes there's nothing to say  
about  
death.

## **grip the dark**

I sit here  
drunk now  
listening to the  
same symphonies  
that gave me  
the will to go on  
when I was 22.

40 years later  
they and I are not quite so  
magical.

you should have  
seen me then  
so  
lean  
no  
gut  
I was  
a gaunt string of a  
man:  
blazing, strong,  
insane.

say one wrong  
word  
to me  
and I'd crack you right  
there.

I didn't want to be  
bothered with

anything or  
anyone.

I seemed to be  
always on my way to some  
cell  
after being booked for  
doing things  
on or off the  
avenue.

I sit here  
drunk now.  
I am  
a series of  
small victories  
and large defeats  
and I am as  
amazed  
as any other  
that  
I have gotten  
from there to  
here  
without committing murder  
or being  
murdered;  
without  
having ended up in the  
madhouse.

as I drink alone  
again tonight  
my soul despite all the past  
agony  
thanks all the gods  
who were not  
there  
for me  
then.

## the dwarf with a punch

this is many years later  
and I still can't figure it out  
but it was in New York  
and New York has its own rules and  
anyhow, I am sitting around in one of those  
places  
with many round tables  
with their tough and terrible knights;  
me, I don't feel so good, as usual,  
neither tough nor terrible,  
just rotten,  
and I am sitting with some woman  
with some kind of hood over her head,  
she is half crazy  
but that doesn't matter.  
she has a name, Fay,  
I think it was,  
and we have been drinking, going from place to  
place, and we went in there,  
and it seemed terribly  
lively  
because there was a dwarf about 3  
feet tall  
and the dwarf was walking around  
drunk  
and he'd stop at a table  
and look at a man  
and say,  
“well, what YOU got to say?”  
and then the dwarf would crush him one in the mouth,  
only the dwarf had very good hands and  
one hell of a punch.

then everybody would laugh and the dwarf would  
go to the bar  
for another drink.

“keep him away from me, Fay!” I told her.

“uh? whatzat? what? who?”

“keep him away from me!”

“what? waz? away?”

the dwarf unloaded on another guy  
and everybody laughed,  
even I laughed. that dwarf could punch.  
he had a lot of  
practice.

he danced to the bar  
doing a little soft shoe  
then he noticed a sailor  
very blond and young and  
scared.

the kid pissed in his pants  
and smiled at the  
dwarf.

the dwarf chopped him a  
good one;  
his next smile was a  
bit bloody.

then the dwarf put another on his chin  
knocking the sailor over  
backward in his  
chair, out  
cold.

k.o! all hail the  
champion!  
then the dwarf saw

me. the man at the table in  
back.

“keep him away from me, Fay!”  
I said.

“lez have another drink!” she said.  
(she had a full drink in front of her.)  
he came up to me  
in all 3 feet of his  
glory.

“well, what YOU got to say?”  
I didn’t answer. I didn’t have anything to say  
that he would understand.

“nothing, hah?”  
I nodded. it came. I felt my chair rock, then  
settle again on its legs. shots of red and yellow and  
blue light followed, then laughter.  
sitting there

I swung back.  
his poor 3 feet slid along the floor like a  
rag doll  
and then they were down on me  
it seemed like a dozen men  
(but it might have been 3 or 4)  
and I caught some more  
good ones.

then I was thrown outside,  
I got up  
and found a hanky  
and tried to stop  
the worst of the blood  
and Fay was there,

"you coward, you hit that little  
man!"

I walked down the street  
but she was right there with me  
and we went into the next place  
and I looked around  
and seeing that everyone was more than  
4 feet tall,  
I ordered 2 more  
drinks.

## the elephants of Vietnam

first they used to, he told me,  
gun and bomb the elephants,  
you could hear their screams over all the other sounds;  
but you flew high to bomb the people,  
you never saw it,  
just a little flash from way up  
but with the elephants  
you could watch it happen  
and hear how they screamed;  
I'd tell my buddies, listen, you guys  
stop that,  
but they just laughed  
as the elephants scattered  
throwing up their trunks (if they weren't blown off)  
opening their mouths  
wide and  
kicking their dumb clumsy legs  
as blood ran out of big holes in their bellies.

then we'd fly back,  
mission completed.  
we'd get everything:  
convos, dumps, bridges, people, elephants and  
all the rest.

he told me later, I  
felt bad about the  
elephants.

## **breakfast**

waking up on those mornings in the drunk tank,  
busted lower lip, loose teeth, brains swimming in  
a cacophony not yours, with  
all those strange others swathed in rags, noisy  
now in their mad sleep, with nothing for  
company but a stopped-up toilet,  
a cold hard floor  
and somebody else's  
law.

and there was always one early voice, a loud voice:  
“BREAKFAST!”

you usually didn't want it  
but if you did  
before you could gather your thoughts  
and scramble to your feet  
the cell door was slammed  
shut.

now each morning it's like a slow contented  
dream, I find my slippers, put them on,  
do the bathroom bit, then walk down the  
stairway in a swirl of furry bodies, I am  
the feeder, the god, I clean the cat bowls, open  
the cans and talk to them and they get excited and  
make their anxious sounds.  
I put the bowls down as each cat moves to  
its own bowl, then I refill the water dish  
and watch all five of them eating  
peacefully.

I walk back up the stairway to the bedroom  
where my wife is still asleep, I crawl beneath  
the sheets with her, place my back to the sun  
and am soon asleep again.

you have to die a few times before you can really  
live.

## **inverted love song**

I could scream down 90 mountains  
to less than dust  
if only one living human had eyes in the head  
and heart in the body,  
but there is no chance,  
my god,  
no chance.  
rat with rat dog with dog hog with hog,  
play the piano drunk  
listen to the drunk piano,  
realize the myth of mercy  
stand still  
as even a child's voice snarls  
and we have not been fooled,  
it was only that we wanted to believe.

## Salty Dogs

got to the track early to study the odds and here's  
this man coming by

dusting seats. he keeps at his work, dusting, most  
probably glad to have his simple job.

I'm one of those who doesn't think there is much difference  
between an atomic scientist and a man who cleans the seats  
except for the luck of the draw—

parents with enough money to point you safely toward a more  
generous life.

"how's it going?" I asked him as he dusted by.

"o.k., how about you?" he asked.

"I do all right with the horses. it's with the women I lose."

he laughed. "yeah. a man has two or three bad experiences,  
it really sets him back."

"I don't mind two or three," I told him, "I mind  
eleven or twelve."

"man, you must know something by now. who do you like in the  
first?"

I told him that Salty Dog was reading 4-to-1 and should  
finish one-two. (45 minutes later it did.) but it wasn't 45  
minutes later yet. the man went on dusting and I thought of all my  
rotten jobs and how glad I was to have them. for a  
while. then it was a matter of quitting or getting fired.  
both felt good.

it's when you live with one woman for more than two years you know what's bound to happen only you don't know exactly why. it's not in the chart. it's in past performance, not in the chart.

my friend, dusting the seats, he didn't know exactly why either.

I walked over for a coffee. the slim girl behind the counter was a brunette with a tiny blue flower in her hair, nice eyes, nice smile. I paid for my coffee.

"good luck," she said.

"you too," I said.

I took the coffee to my seat, the wind came up from the west, I took a sip and waited for the action, thinking of many things, too many things. the scene dissolved into grass and trees and the dirt track and I remembered dirty shades in dirty rooming houses flapping back and forth in a light wind, and I thought about dirty troops plundering some new village, and about my old girlfriends unhappy again with their new men.

I sat and drank my coffee and waited for the first race.

## **brainless eyes**

in the bitter morning  
high roses grow  
and the frogs celebrate  
victory.

in the empty balloon of night  
nothing grows;  
the night  
gnaws and belches  
and victory is celebrated only  
by indecent ladies  
with spread legs  
and brainless eyes.

at noon,  
say at noon,  
something happens  
finally.

the signal changes  
the traffic moves through.

life itself is not the miracle.  
that pain should be so constant,  
that's the miracle—  
that hammer of the thing  
when you can't even scream or weep  
and it sits all over you  
looking into your eyes  
eating your flesh.

morning night and noon  
the traffic moves through  
and the murder and treachery  
of friends and lovers  
and all the people  
move through you.

pain is the joy of knowing  
the unkindest truth  
that arrives without  
warning.

life is being alone  
death is being alone.

even the fools weep

morning night and noon.

## unbelievable

I've been going to the track for  
decades  
but I saw something new  
today.

2 horses threw their riders.  
usually when a horse throws  
his or her rider  
he (or she) continues to run  
in the same direction as  
the other horses.  
but  
this time  
both horses turned  
and began to run in the  
opposite direction,  
in other words,  
*toward* the oncoming  
field.  
it was a 5/8ths mile  
track  
and they were  
approaching one another  
pretty fast.  
the announcer warned  
the riders  
and as they came  
around the last curve  
and into the stretch  
here came the other  
2 horses right at  
them.

there was no screaming.  
there was a dead  
silence.  
you could hear the hooves  
pounding the dirt.

then one horse swung  
wide  
and went outside the  
field.  
the other headed straight  
into it  
and passed right through  
between the other  
horses.

the other horses reached  
the wire.

mine had won.

but the judges held an  
inquiry and it was  
declared  
no contest.

I didn't give a  
damn.

I kept seeing that horse  
rushing at the field  
and passing right through,  
untouched.

a miracle.

## **war and peace**

to experience  
real agony  
is  
something  
hard  
to write about,  
impossible  
to understand  
while it  
grips you;  
you're  
frightened  
out of  
your  
wits,  
can't sit  
still,  
move  
or even  
go  
decently  
insane.

and then  
when your  
composure  
finally  
returns  
and you are  
able to  
evaluate  
the

experience  
it's almost as  
if it  
had happened  
to  
somebody  
else

because  
look at  
you  
now:

calm  
detached

say

cleaning your  
fingernails

looking through  
a  
drawer  
for  
stamps

applying  
polish  
to your  
shoes

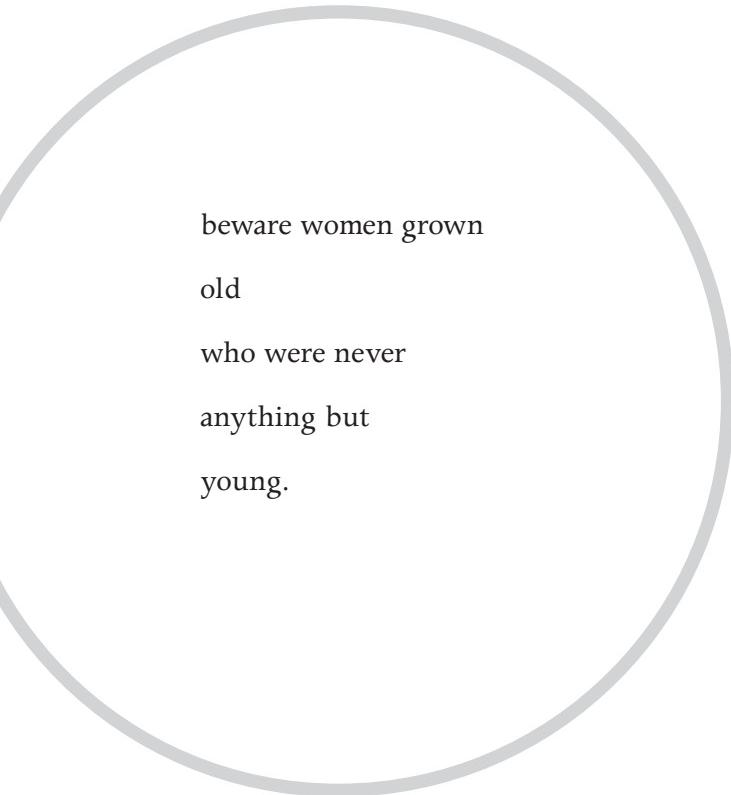
or  
paying the  
electric  
bill.

life is  
and is not  
a  
gentle  
bore.

## the harder you try

the waste of words  
continues with a stunning  
persistence  
as the waiter runs by carrying the loaded  
tray  
for all the wise white boys who laugh at  
us.  
no matter. no matter,  
as long as your shoes are tied and  
nobody is walking too close  
behind.  
just being able to scratch yourself and  
be nonchalant is victory  
enough.  
those constipated minds that seek  
larger meaning  
will be dispatched with the other  
garbage.  
back off.  
if there is light  
it will find  
you.

two



beware women grown  
old  
who were never  
anything but  
young.



## all the little girls

it was up in northern California  
and he stood in the pulpit  
and he had been reading for some time  
he had been reading many poems about  
Mother Nature and the inherent goodness  
of man.

he believed that everything was  
all right with the world.  
and you couldn't blame him:  
he was a tenured professor who had never  
been in jail or in a whorehouse;  
who had never had his used car die  
on the freeway; who  
had never needed more than  
three drinks during his wildest  
evening;  
who had never been rolled, flogged or  
mugged;  
who had never been bitten by a dog;  
who got regular gracious letters from Gary  
Snyder, and whose face was  
kindly, unmarked and  
tender. finally,  
his wife had never betrayed him,  
nor had his luck.

he said, "I'm just going to read  
three more poems and then I'm going  
to step down from here and let  
Chinaski read."

"oh no," said all the  
little girls in their pink and blue  
and white and orange and lavender  
dresses. "oh no,  
read some more, read some  
more!"

he read one more poem and then he said,  
"this is the last poem that  
I will read."

"oh no," said all the little  
girls in their red and green see-  
through dresses. "oh no," said  
all the little girls in their tight blue  
jeans with little sewn hearts on them.  
"oh no," said all the little girls,  
"please read  
more poems!"

but he was as good as his word.  
he got the poem out and he got down and  
vanished somewhere. as I got up to read  
the little girls wiggled in  
their seats and one of them hissed and  
some of them made interesting remarks to me  
which I will use in a poem at some later date  
because this particular goddamned poem  
has to end somewhere.

anyway, it was two or three weeks later  
when I got this letter from the poet William  
saying that he *did* enjoy my reading.  
he was a true gentleman.

I was in bed with a  
three-day hangover. I lost the envelope  
but I took the letter and folded it  
into one of those paper airplanes  
I had learned to make in grammar  
school. it sailed around the room  
and landed between an old Racing Form  
and a pair of well-worn shorts.

we have not corresponded since.

## no more of those young men

my first husband, Retzel, she said,  
flew gliders. he had only one hand.  
he never went down on me even once.  
he wants to meet you, he lives in  
Redondo Beach.

Redondo Beach, I said, Redondo Beach.

my next husband,  
Craft, took pills and played the piano all day.  
then he had to have one of his fingers operated on.  
a wart. he was cruel to me. he knows now  
how cruel he was to me.

where is he now?

Africa. he's still in Africa.  
I hitched all over Africa. I bummed down there  
on a boat. I met a man with a  
leopard. he used to take his leopard for a  
walk every day on a chain.  
one day he didn't show up. his leopard had  
eaten him.

that's a funny story.

I think so too. I like you. you understand  
things. no more of those young men for me,  
those hard bodies. I want you. you're in control  
of everything.

I am?

yes, my next husband,  
Larry, once covered my body with  
rose petals. all those flowers! it was  
lovely but he didn't make love to me  
again for 2 years. he was such a bad  
lover. you're a great  
lover.

I am?

yes, wouldn't you like to go to Holland?

no.

to Paris?

no.

to Africa?

no.

Redondo Beach?

no.

you're strange. don't you like to  
travel?

I'm sick of that.

you should have seen me fly Retzel's glider!  
I was good on that glider.  
but he would never go down on  
me.

Retzel?

yes, he's a publicist now. he makes good  
money.

some day I'll tell you about my  
wives.

I don't want to hear about your  
wives. I don't want to hear about  
any of  
them.

she turned over in bed  
giving me her back and her  
behind.

kid, I said, tell me more about  
Retzel.

she turned back toward  
me. you really want to  
hear?

sure.

then we lay there on our backs  
and she talked about Retzel  
and I listened.

## legs

she arrived in a taxi  
completely intoxicated.  
it was  
after one of my long days as  
a May Co. stock boy  
and I sat there  
exhausted and  
sucking at  
my beer and  
looking at her  
in her rumpled state  
spread across the bed  
skirt hiked high.

I sucked at my drink  
then walked over  
to the bed and lifted  
her skirt higher:  
such a sight  
those glorious legs  
uncovered and helpless.

she was a great woman with  
great legs.

we had such tremendous fun  
and much agony together  
for some years

but she found  
life too hard;  
she died  
34 years ago and

I haven't seen  
legs like that  
since  
and I have  
never stopped

looking.

## Jane's shoes

my shoes in the closet like forgotten  
lilies,  
my shoes alone right now,  
like dogs walking dead avenues,  
and I got a letter from a  
woman in a hospital,  
love, she says, love,  
but I do not write back,  
I do not understand myself,  
she sends me photographs of  
herself  
taken in the hospital  
and I remember her on other  
nights,  
not dying,  
her shoes with heels like daggers  
sitting next to mine  
in the closet;  
how those strong nights  
lied to us,  
how those nights became quiet  
finally,  
my shoes alone in the closet now  
flown over by coats and  
awkward shirts,  
and I look into the hole the  
door leaves  
and the walls, and I do not  
write  
back.

## Rimbaud be damned

it was in Santa Fe.  
we sat up waiting for her.  
she had gone to some art show or some other  
goddamned silly useless thing.

she was a good artist  
better than many men  
and that was the  
problem.

“what the hell happened to Helen?”

“where’s Helen?”

Helen’s husband, x-husband, was now sitting on the top of a hill somewhere with a new blue-eyed whore.  
quite a  
whore: she even wrote  
poetry. Vicki was her name. Vicki was now “Mrs.”  
she had exchanged a rich husband for an even  
richer one.

“Helen asked me not to hate Vicki,” said my hostess,  
“but hell, I can’t even like Vicki.”

“hell,” said my host, “can’t you  
try?”

“do you like Vicki?” asked my hostess.  
Vicki had looked good to me. I couldn’t find anything wrong with her.

“where’s Helen?” I asked again. “oh where oh where the hell is Helen?”

“she’ll be here, she’ll be here, she said she was coming”

Helen showed up 3 hours later.  
she looked like a snake in a green dress, all fluid,  
wild wild, glazed,  
her silver necklace pulsating  
on her throat  
right under my nose.  
she was consumed by 3 simple things:  
drink, despair, loneliness; and 2 more:  
youth and beauty.

it was too much:  
I could not withstand the force of  
her. I kissed her. I kissed her  
again. I was like a schoolboy,  
all my toughness  
gone.

“let’s get the hell out of here!”  
I told her, ignoring our host and hostess.

we went next door to her place  
and I sat in her kitchen drinking and  
watching  
her.

“your body, your body, Jesus!” I told  
her. she was truly beautiful and laughing,  
just like you read about in a novel  
only it never really happens to  
anybody.

she twisted her body and while humming  
did a lovely dance filled with  
innuendo.

“baby, I love you,” I said, “baby, I love  
you!”

we walked down a dark hall hung with a  
crucifix and some of her paintings. we entered  
another large room. I hung on to my  
drink.

“stay here,” she said.

I sat on a couch and drank. it seemed  
cold and hollow suddenly and  
I wondered where she had  
gone.

then I looked around and she was lying on another couch  
naked and smiling  
which was unsettling  
for I am used to undressing my  
women

and the look of her stark naked there reminded me more of  
my slaughterhouse days than  
it did of Mozart,  
but, of course, who wants to fuck  
Mozart?

I finished my drink and undressed and I tried  
but I guess I was not much  
it was my fault  
my fault  
and she shoved me  
away.

I made a few more halfhearted  
tries and then she got up and left.

I also dressed and then  
I don't remember much else except  
being pretty drunk.

but then when she shoved me out into the rain  
I revived.

the rain was wet the rain was cold the rain was  
freezing.

“shit,” I said, “shit!” I ran back to her  
door or to the door I thought was her door  
but there seemed to be dozens of doors,  
a series of apartments all  
enjoined.

I beat on the door I hoped was hers:  
“baby, baby, I don’t want to fuck you! I realize that I am  
a lousy lover! all I want is to get out of this  
goddamned rain!”

she didn’t reply. I gave up. I ran back to  
my first host’s apartment. I beat on his door.  
it didn’t work. the rain was like ice.  
I looked into an open garage but it was filled with mud and water;  
no place to lie down.

“let me in!” I screamed. “Jesus! mercy! what have I done?  
what have I failed to do? YOU ARE YOUR BROTHER’S KEEPER!”

my host came to the door:  
“you are a dirty dog!”

“I know, but let me in,  
please.”

he opened the door and I followed him down the  
hall.

“boy oh boy,” he said, “you are a son-of-a-bitch, you are  
a yellow hound, you aren’t worth a damn!”

“I know it,” I said.

“did you tell her that I was an x-con?”

“hell, no, I wasn’t even thinking of  
you.”

“then what the hell do you want from  
me?”

“nothing. you paid the  
train fare down.”

“you insulted us both. I don’t care about myself but you can’t  
insult my wife. you said to Helen, ‘let’s you and I get the  
hell out of here, these other people are nothing!’ ”

“fuck that. you got any whiskey  
left?”

“in the refrigerator.”

“thanks.”

he grunted and climbed into bed beside his  
wife.

I brought the bottle out to my cot  
and nipped nipped nipped and  
listened to the  
rain. I thought the night was  
over but then he began  
again:

“I thought you were a great writer  
I thought you were a great man  
that’s why I paid your fare down here  
that’s why I published your poetry

that's why I wanted all these people to meet  
you!"

"all right," I said, gulping the good whiskey,  
"I'll leave in the morning, why don't we all go to  
sleep?"

"you are really a son-of-a-bitch!  
I never thought you'd be such a son-of-a-bitch!  
why do you always keep your eyes half closed?  
why can't you look a man in the face?  
why do you always avert your glance?"

"I dunno, I dunno."

"you're yellow, that's all: YELLOW!"

I knew it was true  
and I took a big hit of whiskey and  
said:  
"ya wanna go outside and fight?"

"hell! you've got ten years on me!"

"I'll give ya the first  
punch!"

"you promise you'll leave in the morning?"

"sure."

.• • •

Helen heard about me leaving  
from them I guess  
and she came down a little early the next morning to ask if  
she could drive me to the little hotel to catch the bus to  
the train station.

she still looked good  
even more than before  
dressed in tight pants and Indian moccasins and  
when nobody was looking  
I reached over and pinched her  
foot. she ignored it but did not tell me to  
go to hell  
so I felt all warm  
inside.

“o.k., I’ll drive him down,” she said to my  
hosts.

“thanks,” they said.

I went in to take a  
shit.

“we hate to see him go,” I heard  
my hosts say.

“so do I,” she  
said.

a big turd dropped  
out.

"I'll be back at 2 to pick him up,"  
she said.

"goodbye."

"goodbye."

when I came out there were 2 Indians sitting there  
with my hosts.

the Chief said, "I trusted that nigger with 8 bucks  
for 2 four-pound sacks of chili beans. it's been 2  
weeks and he ain't back yet. he worked for some cement company.  
lemme have your phone book, I'm gonna find that  
bastard!"

they introduced me to his squaw. I kissed her on the  
cheek. she giggled. she was about 60 years old and had  
bad legs.

"I got problems," said the Chief, and  
then he ripped the blanket off my cot  
and wrapped it around and around himself.  
"I am big Chief," he said, "all I need is a  
good piece of ass and then to catch that nigger."

"don't look at me," I told him, "I am  
neither."

the Chief looked at  
me. "I think I need a bath,"  
he said.

he went and climbed into one of the 3 tubs in one of the 3 bathrooms. then the squaw decided that she also needed a bath. and then somebody else decided they had to take a shit. they all vanished. I drank my drink and went back to sleep.

. . .

"we are so sorry to see you go," a voice said, waking me.

the Indians had left.

"it's all right," I said.

I didn't get any argument.

I got into the car with Helen and the sight  
of her nylon knees beat hammers into my brain.  
I was so sorry that I would never possess anything good,  
anything like her,  
that nothing good would ever belong to me  
not because I was always poor in dollars  
but because I was poor at expressing myself one-on-one.  
I was as yellow as the sun perhaps  
but also as warm and as true as the sun  
somewhere there inside me  
but nobody would ever find it.

I would certainly end up forever crying the blues into a coffee cup in a park for old men playing

chess or silly games of some sort.  
shit! shit!

and then Helen shifted the gears and we rolled down through the  
rich hills and there was nothing I could say to her  
about her beauty or how tough I was  
or that just to sit and look at her for a month  
never to touch her again  
would be my only desire  
but like a bastard I was probably lying to myself  
I probably wanted everything everything  
but now at 45  
having lived with a dozen women and loving none  
I was now crazy, finished. as she  
drove me through the hills everything screamed inside of  
me, and I kept saying as we drove along  
(to myself, of course)  
fucker, it will pass,  
everything passes,  
it's all a joke  
a joke on you,  
forget it, think of dead dogs dead things think of  
yourself: unwanted, broke, simple, a supposed poet writing of  
deep things, but you can't really write about anything except  
YOURSELF. isn't it true? isn't it true? you are a prick,  
a self-centered jackass only wanting an easy way out? you crave  
money, grandstands full of applause, recognition and a book  
of poems that will still be admired in the year 2,179.

you are a  
shit-yellow screaming jackal: you ain't gonna make it and  
you might as well get used to it  
now.

we drove up to the little hotel  
and the poor jackass poet said,  
“may I say goodbye?” it was  
like a bad movie, only it wasn’t a movie:  
I could understand Dos’s *Crime and Punishment*  
I could understand the moon leaning across a bar on skid row  
and asking for a drink, but I couldn’t understand anything about  
myself,  
I was murdered, I was shit, I was a tentful of dogs,  
I was poppies mowed down by machine-gun fire  
I was a hotshot wasp in a web  
I was less and less and still reaching for  
something, and I thought of her corny remark  
a night or so ago:  
“you have wounded eyes.”  
corny, of course, but anything that comes from a real  
woman is not corny  
and I thought of her decent paintings of people and things  
reaching wanting wanting  
and like a shell-shocked Jap surrounded by heroic  
American troops  
I kissed her  
goodbye.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it good for you,”  
she said. “I wasn’t ready, I guess.”  
“no, it was my fault,”  
I told her.

I walked into the little hotel in that  
small town (from where they took you to the train  
via bus) and I got lost, shit, I got lost,

I couldn't find the ticket office, up and  
down steps  
in and out of doors  
tears again finally  
like a bad movie again, and  
finally I found the ticket agent  
and went through the business  
of buying a ticket.

I went and sat in the lobby and  
I looked up from my ticket  
and there she was.  
“what are you doing here?” I asked.

“I saw you all hunched up and sad and cold.  
I kept thinking of you.”

the bus to the train was late, everything was  
late, so she drove me around town meanwhile and I had to go through the  
whole thing again with her.

and I knew that even the proper words would never do  
the trick. I was dirty, dirt, I looked like dirt,  
I was dirty, dirty dirt. I just wanted to get inside of her,  
stay there, I was nothing but a cunt-wanter and  
I was broke. I couldn't spell, I didn't even know about using  
2 or 3 forks at dinner, I didn't know anything about Harvard or  
diplomas or 50 grand a year, and she knew that all that  
was true: I had been kicked around for too long, I no longer  
knew the way up or out or even wanted to know: I was destined for  
failure.

I said goodbye again  
sucking up all that was left of her into the  
little that was left of  
me. I said, “don’t look for me again. fuck it.  
we are all lost. goodbye, goodbye.”

she was great. she drove off. I watched that last flash  
of her go around the corner and disappear and  
then I walked back into the hotel lobby.

they were chummy, 5 or 6 assholes still sitting and  
waiting there.

2 were doctors. another was the possessor of something great  
and important. they all had wives. it was beginning to  
snow.

we all climbed into the bus to go to the  
train. I was already numb,  
numb again,  
numb  
again  
again and again,  
numbness and pain swelling in  
me—just like in the good  
old times.

the Mexican drove down the road and almost stripped the  
gears.

the comfortable people made comfortable jokes  
about weather and things  
but I sat mostly silent  
saying a word or so when necessary  
a word or so  
trying to hide from them the fact that I was a fool  
and feeling terrible  
and the small hills began to be covered with snow  
slowly things became white  
slowly things became whiter  
and I knew that it all would finally pass  
and thank the good grace of the good God,  
my years and time were running  
out; we drove on and on,  
past little villages and both good things and  
bad things were happening to the  
people in those villages too,  
but I still was nothing  
but arms and ears and eyes and maybe there'd be  
either some good luck for me or  
more death tomorrow.

## bewitched in New York

the lady was the most unfaithful and terrible I had  
ever encountered and I knew it and she knew it and she was  
both ugly and beautiful at the same time and the  
two of her just sat there on the window  
ledge of that open hotel window  
in New York City on  
one of the hottest days of all time, no  
air-conditioning, no fan, we sweated and  
suffered and waited for something  
to happen.

I was drunk, she was on drugs, we had just  
concluded a slippery bit of  
copulation and afterward she said, “you son-of-a-  
bitch, we’re stuck here in hell!”

“good,” I said.

then I saw her fall out of the window, we  
were four floors up, I heard the scream,  
her body was gone.

then it was back, she was sitting on the  
window ledge again. “did you see that?” she  
asked. “I fell out of the window!”

“good,” I said.

“but somehow I pulled myself back in!” she  
said.

“good,” I said.

"is that all you can say?" she asked.

" 'good'?"

"I can say that I think you're a witch or a devil  
and that your window act just now proves  
it."

I felt that by falling out she had lifted my  
spirits and then she had deliberately dashed  
them by climbing back  
in.

"so I'm a witch or a devil, huh? well, no more  
ass for you!"

"good," I said.

sometimes you live and stay with a woman and have no  
real idea why.

with her I knew: it was the simple, fascinating,  
unrelenting mystery and terror of  
her self.

## don't worry, baby, I'll get it

he saw her in a liquor store  
and it shook him  
shook shook shook  
like shark meat alive still in sunlight flopping.

he hurled his eyes at her,  
a miracle, he heard her talking to him,  
she was funny, she made him laugh, she made him feel like  
all the doors were open for him.

it was easy. she went back to his place with him.  
they talked. it was easy. she was a glorious fuck. they  
fucked 3 times. she  
stayed.

“Smalz,” they phoned him from work the next day,  
“what ya doin’, ya didn’t come  
in! we got the Granger-Wently order to get  
out: 45 six-foot squeegees and 90 gallons of  
ultramarine Day-Glo!”

“I’m busy,” he said, and they replied,  
“we can get a shipping clerk  
anywhere!” he hung up, turned her over and  
fucked her  
again.

it wasn’t the same as with the others:  
every time he finished he felt he wanted more.  
as she took the trip to the bathroom it seemed as if he  
hadn’t yet really had her, and anything she put on,

a newspaper hat, a pair of his socks, she looked glorious, funny funny, hell, she made him feel good, everything she said, shit, was a joke. she'd put that body up against his every morning and say, "ah, don't go ta work, Eddie baby, stay wit me!" "I can't go to work, sweets, I don't have no job," he'd say, and they'd go at it again.

so the day came: no rent, no coffee, no wine, no cigarettes. the landlord stated: one more day; get it up or get it out—!

"shit, I thought you knew what you were doing," she told Smaltz. it was the first time she wasn't funny.

"don't worry, baby, I'll get it," he told her, and they went one last good one.

lucky, he had the .32. he thought, liquor store, no, I'll get the big stuff, she's got it comin', she's for me, mine, paper hat, all that shaking, god, nothing like it.

he tried the bank. the big gray one nearby. he went in. he was ready: .32, paper bag, the note: "a stickup. quiet and you don't die. no buttons. put money in bag. I am desperate and will kill. please let us both live."

she emptied the drawer into the bag. he saw it:  
lots of hundreds, fifties. sweet mother. a trip to Paris.  
the bank clerk looked good too. he'd like to fuck  
her. anybody would.

he was almost at the door  
when he sensed she'd tripped the button right  
away. they'd even cleared the  
crowd. the guard at the door was easy—  
he was so fat Smaltz couldn't miss:  
he dropped like a putty freak.

outside he saw the squad car;  
the thing was driving along the wrong side of  
the street—how could they do that?—  
keeping even as he was running,  
and firing at his ass,  
coming close; he ran up an alley, dead end,  
but he caught a freight elevator  
at the bottom, "move it up! MOVE IT UP!"  
he shouted at another freak  
but the freak just stood there  
looking at the .32, and he shot the freak,  
nothing else to do,  
and he was working at the handles, trying to  
close the doors  
when they got there, fired at him,  
fired into that cheap tin elevator; he couldn't get off a  
return shot. they got him, took the paper bag out of his  
hand.

the next night she was sleeping with the owner of a hardware store, Harry, a good solid income, 2 fingers missing from his right hand—hunting accident in Indiana, 1938.

you could get another shipping clerk anywhere.

## the telephone message machine

is one of the world's greatest  
inventions.

seldom do I pick up the phone  
to interrupt the  
message  
and speak directly to the  
caller.

and I hardly ever phone  
anybody  
these days  
nor did I in the  
past  
unless it was some new girlfriend  
who had me by the  
balls.

and she never had an  
answering machine  
just pills  
unpaid bills  
neglected children  
many pressing needs  
and an utterly overvalued sense of her  
self,  
especially by  
me.

## that nice girl who came in to change the sheets

I met her when she came in to  
change the sheets.

St. Louis.

she told me: you're sick.

and I said:

yes, I'm sick.

and she said:

you need something to drink

I came to change the sheets

but you need something to drink

give me some money and

I'll come back with something to  
drink.

so

I gave her the money

not knowing her

but she came back with something to  
drink.

she sat in a chair and I

stayed in bed and we drank

silently.

and then we began to talk

and then we laughed a little

and I began to feel better and she

looked better

and I said:

I didn't think you'd come back

and she said:

hell, I work here.

and I said:

o, that's why you came

back.

and she said:

no, that's not why I came back.

and

I liked that.

I hardly remember how it happened

but we were soon both in bed

smoking cigarettes and drinking

beer

out of those heavy quart

jugs.

there seemed no hurry.

and then it began to

work. I don't know how it worked

but it was all right. we

fucked.

and she got up and closed the windows to the south

and said:

that's what's killing you

those gas fumes coming up from the avenue

that

and the drinking. at least we can get you

away from the gas fumes.

we laughed and then she got back in bed and we

talked some more and smoked and she

got out of bed and said

she had to go—

her boyfriend lived downstairs with her,

and I said goodbye

and she left and  
then I looked over at the chair  
and I saw the clean white sheets.  
she had forgotten to change the sheets  
so I got up and  
changed the sheets for her.

## **an agreement on Tchaikovsky**

both my legs are broken at the knees  
and I can't move my right arm:  
it's Spring and the birds are popping  
in and out of the brush  
driving the cats crazy.

my good friend, Randy, frequents the  
men's crappers at the racetrack  
looking for wallets: smart boy:  
if his folks had been rich  
he tells me he would have gone  
on to Harvard.

she keeps playing Tchaikovsky's 4th,  
the one that goes  
ka plunk plunk plunk plunk plunk;  
I don't like it  
but old lady Rose  
my neighbor  
at the Sunset Park Rest Home  
thinks it's  
*beautiful.*

everybody's too old here to use  
the tennis court  
there's a layer of dust over the whole thing  
and the net's a bunch of busted string.

old lady Rose went to visit her kids today—  
that is, they came and *got* her, the old bag;  
she can't walk at all  
and her legs aren't even busted—

she's just a tiresome old  
*fart!*

I wheeled myself into her room a while back  
and found a 10-dollar bill folded real neat  
and tight;  
she thought nobody'd find it  
in one of her old slippers  
but I've been around  
and she'll come knocking on *my* door tonight  
asking for a "little touch of scotch";  
man, all that crap about the land she USED  
to own in Arizona and how her husband USED  
to wear spats and carry a cane!  
he don't need to wear anything where he's at now;  
and while I was in there  
I cracked old Tchaikovsky #4 across the arm of a chair  
broke it good.  
and old lady Rose was right:  
it sounded damned beautiful to me:  
something like  
the cracking of walnuts.

## **love song to the woman I saw Wednesday at the racetrack**

remembering Savannah 20 years ago  
a four poster bed  
and streets full of helmets and hunters  
things I did then  
left welts;  
ha ha, you say,  
but they come alive as I buy bread  
or lace a shoe  
and it doesn't matter  
except that it works for me  
like the legs of that woman worked for me  
as the sun works for me as it works for the cactus  
and as you work for me  
reading this poem.

and the legs of that woman walk  
as I watch them  
and the horses in the next race  
and the mountains stand there  
watching

welts and a woman's legs  
10-win on number six  
and out in the ocean  
or standing in the park  
like a statue  
I watch her  
walking.

horses standing everywhere:  
Savannah-like seashells in my pocket:  
I have loved you woman  
as surely as I have named you  
rust and sand and nylon.

you have worked for me

wild thing.

## **possession**

an old woman talks to a girl who is  
drying her long black hair while sitting on a back step,  
she points her finger and speaks in a foreign tongue  
and the sun is very beautiful  
as the old woman talks and combs the tangled strands  
(so many moons have gone down before and since).  
suddenly the young girl cries out and shakes her head  
and together they go back into the house  
where together they will die,  
but don't they understand  
it was mine, not theirs:  
the hair, the long black sun-dried hair,  
and maybe the girl too?

## six

10:30 a.m.

5 coffee drinkers at the Pickwick Café  
the boys who work the horse stables  
at Hollywood Park  
turn in their swivel seats  
together,  
one, two, three, four, five,  
they turn  
leaving their cooling coffees and their  
small talk  
to stare at a girl walking by  
who comes in and sits in a booth.  
it is hardly an unusual girl,  
just a girl,  
and one, two, three, four,  
four of them turn back to their coffees;  
the 5th, a young healthy blond boy  
continues to look  
with his nice vacant blue eyes.  
then, at last, he turns back to his coffee.  
it has to be more than it appears, I think,  
ah yes, let me see,  
they are thinking, that's the one who fucked Mick  
out behind the stables last night.  
yes, yes, of course, they are punishing her  
for not fucking *them*.  
nasty boys; little horse turd egos.  
they all believe they have cocks like stallions.  
“another coffee?” the waitress asks me.  
“yes, thanks,” I say, thinking, I should get a  
better look at that girl  
myself.

## man mowing the lawn across the way from me

I watch you walking with your machine.  
ah, you're too stupid to be cut like grass,  
you're too stupid to let anything violate you—  
the girls won't use their knives on you  
they don't want to  
their sharp edge is wasted on you,  
you are interested only in baseball games and  
western movies and grass blades.

can't you take just one of my knives?  
here's an old one—stuck into me in 1955,  
she's dead now, it wouldn't hurt much.  
I can't give you this last one—  
I can't pull it out yet,  
but here's one from 1964, how about taking  
this 1964 one from me?

man mowing the lawn across the way from me  
don't you have a knife somewhere in your gut  
where love left?

man mowing the lawn across the way from me  
don't you have a knife somewhere deep in your heart  
where love left?

man mowing the lawn across the way from me  
don't you see the young girls walking down the sidewalks now  
with knives in their purses?  
don't you see their beautiful eyes and dresses and  
hair?  
don't you see their beautiful asses and knees and  
ankles?

man mowing the lawn across the way from me  
is that all you see—those grass blades?  
is that all you hear—the drone of the mower?

I can see all the way to Italy  
    to Japan  
    to Honduras

I can see the young girls sharpening their knives  
in the morning and at noon and at night, and  
especially at night, o,  
especially at night.

## the girl outside

it is 1:30 p.m.

Monday

65 degrees in November

on Western Avenue.

a girl walks out of a doorway  
and stands in front.

an older woman comes out and leans  
against the doorway.

the girl is in her early twenties  
dressed in a short buttoned-up  
red dress. she has on panty hose and  
orange slippers

and gives the appearance of one  
who has just awakened.

she grins in the afternoon.

she does a short sexy dance and grins.

she is pale. she is blonde.

suddenly she waves at somebody passing  
in a car.

life is interesting.

she is young.

she is a girl.

she dances again. she waves. she  
grins.

that's all very nice for 1:30 in the  
afternoon at 65 degrees.

she wants money.

she waves. she dances.

she grins.

the older woman is bored and walks back  
inside.

I start my car in the parking lot across the street.

I drive west down Oakwood and no longer see the girl.

it's so strange. I think,  
we all need money.

then I turn on the radio and try to  
forget about  
that.

## the chicken

I came by, she said,  
and I hung this roasted chicken on your doorknob  
and two days later it was still hanging there  
swinging in the wind.  
you should have seen that thing!  
and your car was outside  
and the chicken kept swinging  
and I said to my husband,  
what's that stink?  
he must be dead.  
the wind was really blowing that  
chicken around, you should have seen that  
chicken swing, and I told my husband,  
that crazy son-of-a-bitch must be dead  
in there.  
so he got the key and we went in.

yeah, I said, what did you find?

just empty bottles and garbage. you  
were gone. you weren't in  
there.

did you look in all the closets?

we looked everywhere, under the bed,  
everywhere.

I wonder where I was?

I dunno. where did you get that big scab on your head?

I was toasting a marshmallow on a coat hanger  
and burned my fore-  
head.

oh, I thought maybe somebody hit you.

uh-uh, I said, uh-uh.

## **an ancient love**

I don't remember our ages:  
we must have been between 5 and 7,  
there was this girl next door about my age.  
I do remember her name: Lila Jane.  
and one thing she would do every day,  
once a day, was to ask me:  
“are you ready?”  
and I would indicate that I was  
and she would lift her dress and  
show me her panties and they were  
a different color each day.

several decades later she somehow found me  
and came by with her boyfriend  
some fellow who smoked a pipe  
and who read my books  
and she crossed her long beautiful legs  
high  
but not high enough for me to see the panties.

and when they were ready to leave  
I gave her a hug and  
I shook hands with her boyfriend  
and I never saw him or her  
or her panties  
ever again.

## match point

read in the paper where a 72-year-old wife strangled her 91-year-old husband with his necktie.

she said the age difference was unbearable and added that when they had met on a tennis court 30 years earlier the age gap had not seemed important.

it looks like I've been in serious danger at least a half dozen times in the last 25 years or so and still am.

there's just one necktie in my closet, purchased it to go to a funeral not long ago, but I've never played tennis and don't intend to try.

## I also like to look at ceilings

there are policemen in the street  
and angels in the clouds  
and jockeys riding in their silks.

down through the mornings  
up through the nights  
parallel to the afternoons  
there are crippled dogs in  
East Kansas City  
vampires in Eugene, Oregon  
and a long walk for a glass of water in the  
Twin Cities.

I meant to write Angela  
I really did  
and thank her for everything  
because I sincerely  
liked the way she draped shawls on her  
staircase  
and her herb tea  
and the green vines in her  
bathroom  
the view from her bedroom  
and her collection of  
Vivaldi.

but I didn't.

I guess I'm crueler than  
I think I am.

## **no Cagney, me**

I had a borrowed tv set for a month  
and saw some old Cagney movies.

much of Cagney's interaction with women  
takes place in the kitchen.

they say something he doesn't  
like. he slaps them with a dish towel  
or pushes a grapefruit into their  
face. they weep and fall  
into his arms.

me, I am always being attacked by  
women  
especially when I am discouraged or  
tired. they push me out of doorways  
into the rain, into mud puddles on my  
back. they pour beer over my head  
come at me with knives and bookends  
they attack  
snarling like the leopard  
they rip my coats and shirts  
apart.  
they attack me at the moment  
I am casually talking to a  
friend or while I am  
asleep. sometimes they also beat their heads  
against the wall.

I'm leaving, I say.

oh, you always want to end it,  
don't you?

well, Christ, you act like you don't  
like it.

well, go then, go!

I go. no Cagney, me. I drive away  
thinking, oh shit, God, it's so nice to  
be alone again.

you had it, Jimmy.  
what a woman wants is a  
reaction.  
what a man wants is a  
woman.

you're best.

## soup, cosmos and tears

I've known some crazy women  
but the craziest was  
Annette  
and it seems the crazier they are  
the better the lay,  
and what bodies they  
have. Annette always lived with  
Chinese men  
but you never saw them  
that's what scared you,  
even the Mafia is scared of the Chinese—  
“where's the dragon, kid?”  
“that's all right. he knows you're all right.”  
“you sure? when they put the X on you,  
you might as well  
forget it.”  
“I told them you were all right. that's all  
they need.”  
Annette had incense burning,  
all sorts of charts and weirdo books,  
she always talked about the gods  
she had a direct line to the gods.  
“you have been selected by the gods,” she told  
me.  
“o.k., babe, let's make it  
then.”  
“not right now. I want you to try this special soup  
I've made.”  
“special soup?”  
“yes, eat it and you will inherit the forces of  
earth and sun, the entire  
cosmos.”

I went and ate the soup. frankly, it tasted all right,  
though a bit rusty. no telling what the hell she had  
put in there. I finished  
it.

“I feel like a man of steel  
now.”

“you have inherited the force,” she said, “the gods are  
proud of you.”

on the couch I finally got hold of  
her. under that loose orange gown  
was enough woman to kill an  
ox.

“I lived in that hotel in Paris,” she said. “I slept with all of  
them. Burroughs, the whole  
gang. I knew Pound at St. Liz.”

“you slept with Ezra?”

“more than any!”

“oh fuck!”

“go,” she laughed, “ahead.”

it had been good  
soup. those Paris boys and  
Ezra had known a good  
mare.

I rolled  
off.

when she came out of the bathroom she  
had a bottle in her hand and began sprinkling me  
with the  
contents.

“hey, what’s this shit?”

“the tears of the  
gods.”

“the tears of the gods?”

“yes, the tears of the  
gods.”

I laid there until she was  
finished.

then I got up and  
dressed.

“when can I see you  
again?”

“in 2 hours or  
tomorrow.”

I walked to the door.

“you walk like a  
poem,” she said.

“see you in 2  
hours,” I told  
her.

the door closed. what a man had to go through for a  
piece of ass  
in this modern age was  
highly  
suspect.

## **peacock or bell**

I am laughing mouth closed;  
as I turn the pages of my newspaper  
it's like a symphony gone wrong;  
seeing much to make me doubt  
flashing there across the page  
it's like a cheap movie gone haywire;  
my clothing sits in chairs  
like the dead emptied out,  
husks of things wrinkling the vision;  
it's colder than hell (yes) but  
the blankets are thin,  
and the pulled-down shades  
are as full of holes as love is.

I think you've got to be a sportsman;  
yes, for the sportsman it's all right:  
you just crack out the gun  
and blow the head off something  
perhaps off the maiden sitting in  
the chair that grandma sat in,  
but not having a gun,

I go to the phone  
and phone a woman as old as the chair and grandma,  
and she promises to come and charm me;  
she has a toothbrush but no teeth  
and I will probably dance naked for her  
my blob of belly a white sack.

each man has his own way out: mine is doubtful  
but has been working well of late  
and the music of it sometimes frightens me,

but then  
I wake up, buy a paper,  
kick a can,  
pull up the shade,  
start again.

## **purple and black**

a girl in purple pants and black sweater  
crossing the street  
with a camper and high-rise background,  
a Saturday afternoon graveyard Hollywood  
background,  
is quite interesting:  
something moving,  
something moving in purple and black as  
her hair waves in the wind as she turns,  
the sun like the eye of a frog,  
winter is where it's at  
here, and the street is insipid, vapid,  
I could pound myself against that asphalt until  
I bled mad  
and it wouldn't care;  
the girl in purple and black  
gives the street destination and direction  
until she is out of range of my window,  
and now it is again  
what it was, and a small spider  
almost like something made out of a lost hair,  
an eyelid hair,  
crawls along the wall to my left  
and I don't have even the desire to  
kill it. outside my window  
it is ghost-shivered and  
stinks of the malice of men.  
I wait for new arrangements

but meanwhile endure  
as the phone rings  
as I leap from my chair  
like a man shot in the  
back.

## **fulfillment**

she disciplined herself in  
anger  
hatred and cunning  
strategy.

I always thought that it would  
finally pass  
that she was giddy with  
misconception and bad  
advice.

I always felt it would  
pass.

I listened to the charges against me  
knowing some of them to be true  
but certainly not  
important enough  
to become the target of  
violence, envy,  
vengeance.

I thought it would surely  
pass.

I commandeered no  
defense  
thinking that easy  
reason  
would save us  
both

but her determination  
strengthened—  
even then  
I summed it up as headstrong, over-  
zealous  
energy

but the moment I gave ground  
more ground was  
taken.

lord, I thought, it's just simple  
violence

and so I trotted my horse  
out of the stable  
sharpened my knives and  
began a  
counterattack.

she'd finally found  
as good an opponent as could be  
found.

her determination demanded her own  
destruction.

she'd found her  
match  
I mounted my steed  
sword ready  
ready even for the sun.

she'd always wanted war  
I'd grant her wish  
love be damned now  
as love was damned when it  
first arrived.

my reluctance would  
now be gone  
forever

and the blood  
would flow

hers and mine

just as she desired.

**yours**

my women of the past keep trying to locate me.  
I duck into dark closets and pull the overcoats  
over my head.

at the racetrack I sit in the clubhouse  
smoking cigarette after cigarette  
watching the horses come out for the post parade  
and looking over my shoulder.

I go to bet and this one's ass looks like that one's  
ass used to.  
I duck away from her.

then that one's hair might have her under it.  
I get the hell out of the clubhouse and go  
to the grandstand.

I don't want a return of the past.  
I don't want a return of those  
ladies of my past,  
I don't want to try again, I don't want to see  
them again even in silhouette;  
I give them all, all of them to all the other eager  
men, they can have those darlings,  
those tits those asses those thighs those minds  
and their mothers and fathers and sisters and  
brothers and children and dogs and x-boyfriends  
and current boyfriends, they can have them all and  
fuck them all  
if they want to.

I was a terrible and jealous lover who mistreated  
and failed to understand  
them and it's best that they are with others now  
for that will be better for them and that will be  
better for me  
so when they phone or write or leave  
messages  
I will forward them all to their new  
fine fellows.

I don't deserve what they have and I want to  
keep it that way.

## **kissing me away**

she was always thinking about it  
and she was young and beautiful and  
all my friends were jealous:  
what was an old fuck like me  
doing with a young girl like  
her?

she was always thinking about  
it.

we'd be driving along and  
she'd say, "see that little  
place? park over there."

I'd hardly get parked and  
she'd be down on me.

once I drove her to Arizona  
and halfway there  
late at night  
after coffee and doughnuts  
at an all-night joint  
she bent over  
and started in  
while I was navigating the  
dark curves through the  
low hills  
and as I kept driving  
it inspired her to  
new heights.

another time  
in L.A.  
we'd purchased hot dogs and cokes  
and fries and we were eating in  
Griffith Park  
families there  
children playing  
and she unzipped me  
and started in.

"what the hell are you doing?"  
I asked her.

later  
when I asked her  
why  
in front of everybody  
she told me it was  
dangerous and thrilling  
that way.

she asked me one  
time, "why am I staying with an  
old guy like you  
anyhow?"

"so you can give me blow  
jobs?" I replied.

"I hate that term!" she  
said.

“sucking me off,” I suggested.

“I hate that term too!” she said.

“what would you prefer?” I asked.

“I like to think that I’m ‘kissing you away,’ ” she said.

“all right,” I said.

. . .

it was like any other relationship, there was jealousy on both sides, there were split-ups and reconciliations.  
there were also fragmented moments of great peace and beauty.

I often tried to get away from her and  
she tried to get away from me  
but it was difficult:  
Cupid, in his strange way, was really  
there.

whenever I had to leave town  
she kissed me away

good  
a couple of nights in a  
row  
ensuring my  
fidelity.

then all I had to  
do was  
worry about  
her.

when she wasn't  
kissing me away  
we also found time  
to do it  
in several other strange  
ways.

but all that time with  
her it  
was mostly just  
being  
kissed away or  
waiting to be.

we never thought about  
much else.

we never went to  
movies (which I hated  
anyhow).  
we never ate  
out.

we were not curious  
about  
world affairs.  
we just spent our time  
parked in  
secluded places or picnic  
grounds or  
driving dark  
roads to New Mexico,  
Nevada and Utah.

or  
we were in her big oak  
bed  
facing south  
so much of the rest of the  
time  
that I memorized  
each wrinkle in the  
drapes  
and especially  
all the cracks in the  
ceiling.

I used to play games with  
her with that ceiling.

“see those cracks up  
there?”

“where?”

“look where I’m pointing . . .”

“o.k.”

“now, see those cracks, see the pattern? it forms an image. do you see what it is?”

“umm, umm . . .”

“go on, what is it?”

“I know! it’s a man on top of a woman!”

“wrong. it’s a flamingo standing by a stream.”

. . . .

we finally got free of  
one another.  
it’s sad but it’s  
standard operating procedure  
(I am constantly confused by  
the lack of durability in human  
affairs).

I suppose the parting was  
unhappy  
maybe even ugly.  
it’s been 3 or 4  
years now

and I wonder if she  
ever thinks of  
me, of what I am  
doing?

of course, I know what she's  
doing.

and she did it better  
than anybody  
I ever knew.

and I guess that's worth this  
poem, maybe.

if not, then at least a  
footnote: that such affairs are  
not without joy and humor for both  
parties  
and as Saigon and the enemy tanks get  
scrambled in old dreams  
as old and infirm dogs get  
killed crossing roads  
as the drawbridge rises to let  
the drunken fishermen out to  
sea  
it wasn't for nothing  
that  
she was thinking  
about it  
all the  
time.

## goodbye, my love

deadly ash of everything  
we've mauled it to pieces  
ripped the head off  
the arms  
the legs  
cut away the sexual organs  
pissed on the heart

deadly ash of everything  
everywhere  
the sidewalks are now harder  
the eyes of the populace crueler  
the music more tasteless

ash  
I'm left with pure  
ash

first we pissed on the heart  
now we piss on the ash.

## heat

if you have ever drawn up your last plan on  
an old shirt cardboard in an Eastside hotel room of winter  
with last week's rent due and a dead radiator  
you'll know how large small things are  
like yourself coming up the stairway  
maybe for the final time  
with your bottle of wine  
thinking of the lady in #9  
putting on her garters  
and on her dresser there is a  
dark red drinking glass  
which catches the overhead light like a  
soft dream of Jerusalem  
and she dusts herself  
slips into silk and sheath and  
spiked feet  
and unemployed and looking for work  
and maybe looking for you  
she passes you on the  
stairway;  
such disturbing grace  
transforms one.  
like a blue-winged fly exploding into  
the summer sky  
you decide to hang around and  
die later; you enter your room and pour wine like  
blood, inward, and decide in the morning you'll  
get up early and  
read the want  
ads.

## the police helicopter

the police helicopter keeps circling over the yard  
“what do they want?” I ask her.

“they’re probably looking for you,” she says.  
this is not as far-fetched as you might think:  
I went into a bar one night with some friends  
and the owner came out from around the bar  
and asked to speak to me.

“I don’t know if we can serve you or not,  
you must promise to be good,  
you created quite a fuss the last time you  
were here.”

I promised him to be good and that night  
I drank under a great deal of strain.

anyhow, the helicopter keeps circling  
and it is one o’clock in the afternoon  
but the night before it had circled and circled  
shining its beam into the backyard  
and into the crapper.  
it had circled for 45 minutes, then  
had left.

now it is back.  
“what the hell?” I say,  
“they want you,” she says,  
“this is ridiculous,” I say.  
I walk into the backyard.  
there’s nothing out there:  
walnut trees, bamboo stalks, a discarded  
sofa and grass 3 feet high.  
I stand out there and watch the helicopter

circling, circling.

it finally leaves.

I come back in.

“I feel like John Dillinger,” I say.

“you look like John Dillinger,” she says.

I walk to the mirror.

it’s true:

I look like John Dillinger,  
but no woman in a red dress could ever  
finger me. I’m  
too smart.

**ah**

flamingo pain,  
burnt fingers trying to  
light the last of this  
joint  
in a place described  
by terrified ladies  
with money in their purses  
as a "rat hole."

"you can spit on the floor here,"  
I tell them.

but no, from  
a safe  
distance, it appears  
they'd rather discuss  
my poetry.

## **of course**

according to the latest scientific  
study  
it takes 325 years for the last  
brain cell  
to pop.

now I realize that  
most of the girls  
I met in bars  
and brought home with me  
were lying about  
their  
age.

## the dream, the dream

there is always some new Carmen just around  
some corner

somewhere

but then the Carmens never seem to  
last;

the Carmens hardly last any time at  
all.

I see this in the eyes of men  
everywhere—

men sitting at lunch counters

men driving buses

men giving political speeches

men pulling teeth

men in tiger cages

men I see everywhere . . .

the man I see while I shave  
looks back at me through slit-eyes

his Carmen also gone—

that man (me) is now

thinking about what that

razor might really

do, the thought is always

there—

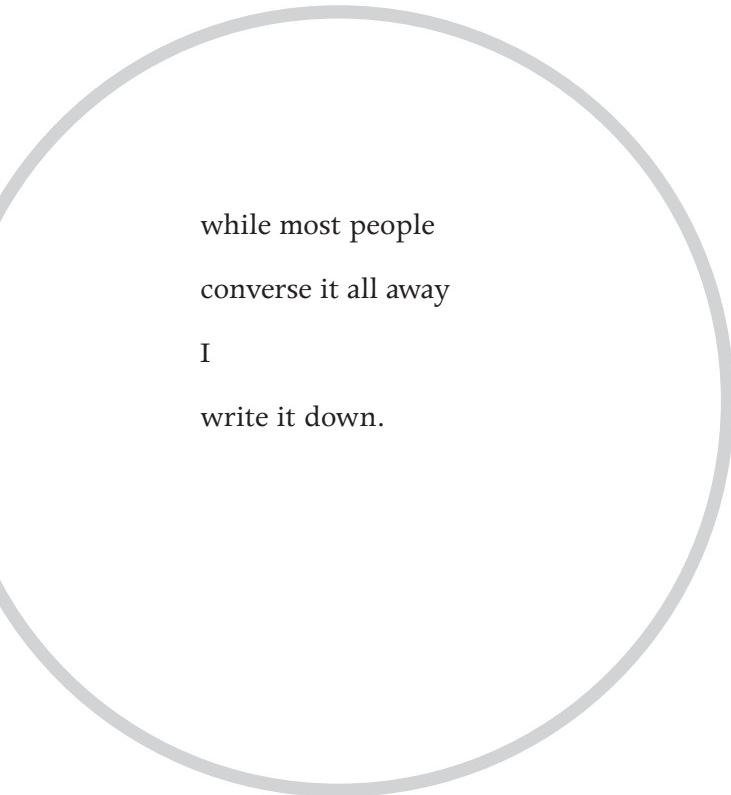
but the game keeps us  
going: there is always some new Carmen  
waiting  
somewhere  
just around some  
corner.

## note on the tigress

first, a terrible argument.  
next, we made love.  
now, at last, I lay peacefully  
on her large bed  
which is  
spread with a field of gracious flowers,  
my head and belly down,  
head sideways,  
sprayed by shaded light  
as she bathes quietly in the  
other room.  
it is all beyond me  
as are most things.  
I listen to classical music on a small radio.  
she bathes.  
I hear the splashing of water.



## three



while most people  
converse it all away  
  
I  
  
write it down.



## **poem for my daughter**

I spoon it  
in: strained chicken noodle dinner  
junior prunes  
junior fruit dessert.

spoon it in and  
for Christ's sake  
don't blame the  
child  
don't blame the  
govt.  
don't blame the bosses or the  
working classes—

spoon it down  
into that little mouth  
like melted  
wax.

a friend phones:  
“whatya gonna do now, Hank?”  
“what the hell ya mean, what am I gonna  
do?”  
“I mean ya got responsibility now, ya gotta bring the  
kid up  
right.”

I feed her instead:  
spoon it in!  
may she achieve  
a place in Beverly Hills  
with never any need for unemployment compensation

and never have to sell to the highest bidder.

and never fall in love with a soldier or a killer of any kind.

and may she  
appreciate Beethoven and Jelly Roll Morton and  
beautiful dresses.

she's got a real  
chance:  
there was once the  
Theoric Fund and now there's the  
Great Society.

"are ya still gonna play the horses? are ya still gonna drink? are ya still gonna—?"

"yes."

she is a waving flower in the wind and the dead center of my heart—  
now she sleeps beautifully like a boat on the Nile.

maybe some day she will bury me.

that would be nice

if it weren't a  
responsibility.

## sheets

those sheets you've got there,  
said the old dame  
in the housewares dept.,  
are for a double bed.

do you have a double bed or a  
single bed?

well, you see, I answered,  
my bed is an unusual bed, it's  
kind of a single-and-a-  
half.

describe your bed, she said.  
what?

describe your  
bed.

I'd rather not, I said.

well, said the old dame, I want you to  
know the sheets you've got there are  
for a double bed, and if you've got a single  
bed, it's against the state  
law.

what? I asked. say that  
again.

I said, it's against the state  
law.

you mean? I asked.

I mean, you can't bring these sheets back  
after you've opened the  
package.

all right, I said, give me a couple of  
singles.

she treated me then with comfortable  
disdain. I believe the old dame had been in

sheets all her  
life. I think they should put young girls  
in the sheets dept.  
after all, sheets don't make me think of sleep  
at all  
but something else  
entirely. especially crisp white new  
sheets.  
they ought to put old dames like her in  
dog food. or garden supplies. and  
when she gave me the singles I knew she knew I slept  
alone. like she  
did.

## sick leave

there I am flat on my belly, Hem is dead, Shake is dead,  
the fish I have caught and eaten and shitted are dead  
and the doc is ramming a glass tube up my ass,  
a glass tube with a little light on the end of it,  
and I am hoping for a medical excuse  
for 2 more days of sick leave  
and the doc plays right along: "ya got some beauts there,  
you oughta be cut . . ." well, the White Russians used to  
cut a hole in a man and take hold of the end of the intestine  
and nail it to a tree and then force the man to  
run around and around the tree.

he pulls the glass tube out of my ass  
and part of me along with it  
he has a face like a walnut and when his nurse  
bends over (which is often)  
her butt is like a big soft pillow or  
powdered doughnut, no blood, just clouds,  
and I say, "Doc, add a day to the excuse,  
I can feel the pain all the way down to my nuts . . ."  
"sure," he says, "sure, I know a lot of boys  
from the Post Office, all nice boys."

at home I screw the cap off the bottle  
and have the first good one; it rained while he rammed me:  
the rain sits glittering in the screen  
like sugar flies eating dreams,  
and I split the Racing Form with my thumb,  
then call my bookie,  
". . . give me 2 across on Indian Blood,  
5 win on Lady Fanfare, 5 place on The Rage."

I hang up and think softly of Kafka  
sleeping under the paws of gophers  
as the lady across the hall sings to her canary.

love has clicked off and on  
like a cigarette lighter  
and now her love is a  
bird.

it gets like that when not much happens  
and you play on a small stage,  
and I pin my medical exemption to  
the front of one of my old paintings  
rub some salve up my ass  
and pour another drink.

## my father

my father liked rules and doing things  
the hard way.

he spoke of responsibilities and laws  
and things that just *had* to be done correctly.  
a man must work, a man must eat.  
a man must own property and mow his lawn.

I turned out to be a drunkard and wanderer  
and his hard-packed letters followed me everywhere.  
I watched the pigeons in the rain in  
New Orleans while his letters said,  
*get going, make something of yourself!*

how hard the world tries and how hard  
everything has been for me.  
my father is old and gray now and when  
I walk into his house he complains  
about the mud I track in. he  
is proud of his house and garden and  
he sits back and waits. but I  
am horrified as he speaks to me:  
he has never thought of death! he does  
not think of dying! as he talks, his  
mouth is a round hole; he leans back content  
upon his pillows. when I leave he says,  
come again, come again.

how many times and why?  
who is my father? did he ever  
play a mandolin or swim the icy waters?  
I know my father: he is dead. there is dead  
mud and there is a tree branch. the tree

branch works easily in the wind and  
between the leaves you see glimpses of the sun.  
it's quiet. it's real. it's warm.  
and the mud on the floor is my father's heart  
and his brain.

## the old woman

she lived in the last old house  
on the block—  
you know the kind: vine-covered, dark, quiet.  
her neighbors were gone—  
nothing but high-rise apartments everywhere.  
you'd see her two or three times a week  
pushing her little shopping cart on its two wheels;  
then she'd come back with stuff in bags,  
go into the house, and that was  
it. she never spoke to anybody.

it was last week about 3:30 p.m.  
that her house began sliding off its foundation.  
it was a very slow slide  
and you got the idea that the house was just stepping  
forward to take a walk down the street—  
except some of the lumber began to snap—  
it sounded like rifle shots, and the house moaned just a  
little—a dark green moan.

somebody called the fire dept.  
and men were running around shutting off the gas  
and shouting at each other  
and telling the crowd to keep back  
and along came one of those television trucks  
and they filmed the house  
sagging toward the street.

then the front door opened and the little old  
lady came out.  
they put the camera on her and a woman ran up with a  
mike.

“how long have you been living in your house?”

“55 years.”

“do you have insurance?”

“no.”

“what will you do  
now?”

“go back to Ireland,” she said.

then she walked away and left them all just standing  
there.

## what made you lose your inspiration?

Norman is drizzling off into a self-pleased  
imbecility as he sits on my couch and  
giggles, pulls at his  
diseased beard

and talks about his girlfriend Katrinka,  
Eugene Debs, F. Scott Fitzgerald and  
LSD.

a bad writer, almost unpublished, this  
gives him strength as  
he sits there and tells me  
that my own writing has gone way down  
from volcanic burst to cigarette-lighter  
flash.

I give him something to drink and  
he gets down on the floor and  
begins talking into my tape machine.  
I light a cigar and  
listen.

“I want to be the Number One Writer of Our  
Time. I want to walk down the street and hear people  
say, ‘hey, *look*, there goes Norman!’ I want people to  
like my poems, I want people to go mad over my  
poems . . .”

I decide that this is probably an honest tape  
but a bad one  
and I no longer  
listen.

about 30 minutes and 3 beer cans later  
the tape runs its little tail  
out. Norman straightens his tie,  
gets off his knees and sits  
down.

"Jack M. says he's gotta make 8 grand this year or he's finished."

I try another  
cigar.

"I'm having luncheon with Ray  
Bradbury, Tuesday."

I don't answer.

"Jesus!"

he suddenly leaps up, runs into my bathroom and begins vomiting. it continues for some time.

"I feel better," he says  
coming back  
in.

"have another drink," I say.

"I'll drive you to your class in  
the morning."

"fine," he says, skimming off the top of a beer.  
then he looks at me and asks,  
"where have you been published  
lately?"

I wave my outstretched  
palms and shrug.

"Jesus, tough! what made you lose your  
inspiration?"

"drink. people. marriage. people.  
marriage again. a child. drink.  
people. jobs. no jobs. drink and  
people."

"my professor would like you to talk to  
his class. he won the Lamont Poetry Prize and he  
digs you."

"tell your professor to go to hell. tell him  
I'm finished."

"you're touchy."

"no, I'm just a flash in the  
pan."

we drink and drink. soon he is asleep  
on the couch, 250 pounds of him rattling the ceiling  
with his poetry.

I go into the bedroom and set the clock for his  
10 o'clock English class. the drink goes down  
better now, but climbing into bed  
I think, where do these bastards come from and  
what has happened to everybody? truly, I  
*am* losing it.

the light is out  
and then a burglar alarm  
somewhere nearby  
sifts through his  
snoring. very apt, I think,  
most apt  
for a very wasted night  
in December  
1965 or  
any other time at  
all.

## **another poem about a drunk and then I'll let you go**

"man," he said, sitting on the steps.  
"your car sure needs a wash and wax.  
I can do it for 5 bucks.  
I got the wax, I got the rags, I got everything  
I need."

I gave him the 5 and went upstairs.  
when I came down 4 hours later  
he was sitting on the steps, drunk.  
he offered me a can of beer.  
he said he was going to do the car  
the next day.

the next day he was drunk again and  
I loaned him a dollar for a bottle of  
wine. his name was Mike.  
a World War II veteran.  
his wife worked as a nurse.

the following day I came down and he was sitting  
on the steps. he said,  
"you know, I been sitting here looking at your car  
wondering how to do it best.  
I wanna do it real good."

the next day Mike said it looked like rain  
and it sure as hell wouldn't make any sense  
to wash and wax a car when it was gonna rain.

the next day it looked like rain again.  
and the next.

then I didn't see him anymore.  
I saw his wife and she said,  
"they took Mike to the hospital,  
he's all swelled up, they say it's from  
drinking."  
"listen," I told her, "he said he was going to wax my  
car. I gave him 5 dollars to wax my  
car."

I was sitting in their kitchen  
drinking with his wife  
when the phone rang.  
she handed the phone to me.  
it was Mike. "listen," he said, "come on down and  
get me. I can't stand this  
place."

when I got there  
they wouldn't give him his clothes  
so Mike walked to the elevator in his hospital  
gown.  
we got on and there was a kid in the  
elevator eating a Popsicle.  
"nobody's allowed to leave here in a gown,"  
he said.

"you drive this thing, kid," I said,  
"we'll worry about the gown."

I stopped at the liquor store for 2 six-packs  
then drove home. I drank with Mike and his wife until

11 p.m.  
then went upstairs.

"where's Mike?" I asked his wife 3 days  
later.

"Mike died," she said, "he's gone."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm very sorry."

it rained for a week after that and I  
figured the only way I'd get that 5 back  
was to go to bed with his wife  
but you know  
she moved out a couple of days  
later  
and an old guy with white hair  
moved in there.  
he was blind in one eye and  
played the French horn.  
there was no way I wanted to make it  
with him.

so I had to wash and wax my own car.

## **dead dog**

Bartkowski completes a 58-yard touchdown pass  
to beat the Packers in the final minute.

I hear it on the radio  
it's Sunday and I'm on the way to the track  
I should make the third race.

the Falcons hold on to win and that's good.

I switch off the radio.

then where the Harbor Freeway branches onto  
the Pasadena

I see a dog up on the ramp  
he's a big one and he's limp  
but he's still breathing.  
his head is crushed.

people who have dogs in their cars  
and let them hang out the window  
when those dogs fall out on the freeway  
often they just keep driving.

I know how to enter the tunnel.  
you take the far right lane while  
the other lanes back up on the left.  
I glide on through.

when I come out of the tunnel  
I slide back into the fast lane.

those sons-of-bitches and their dead  
dogs.

I get to the track at 1:20 p.m.  
take preferred parking  
find a vacant spot at F-5  
lock it up  
and as I'm walking between cars  
I see two men who  
have broken into a car.  
they are taking out the radio,  
the stereo and the speakers.  
they see me and I see them.

"don't say *nothin'*, man!  
if you do, remember we'll see you  
again some day!"

I go inside the track  
it's four minutes to post  
third race coming up  
the crowd has bet Shameen  
with Delahousseye riding  
down from 4 to 2 to 1.  
Song for Two has a line of 2  
and reads 3.  
I rate the horses even  
bet 10-win on Song for Two.

Song for Two wins the photo  
the Shoe can still ride  
and I'm \$31 ahead.

those sons-of-bitches and their dead  
dogs.

I lose the 4th, 5th and 6th races.  
in the 7th they bet Back'n Time down  
to 3-to-5 off a 99 speed rating  
6 furlongs down at Del Mar  
but the colt is 3 years old  
going against older horses  
and has never gone a mile.  
I can see it turning into the stretch  
with a four-length lead and getting beat  
at the wire  
by something.  
but who will do it?  
there are 6 other horses.

I put \$50 place on Back'n Time  
and watch the race.  
the colt has four lengths coming into  
the stretch  
then Don F.  
the longest shot on the board  
begins to close  
and it's tight at the wire.

they hang the photo  
we wait  
then they put up Don F.  
at 19-to-1.

I get \$2.80 place  
so I make \$20  
lose the 8th  
then I'm up only \$18.

in the 9th  
I bet 10-win on Fleet Ruler  
and 2-win on Forecast  
then leave the track  
stand out in the parking lot  
listen to the announcer  
who is hollering  
Forecast is in front  
and here comes Fleet Ruler  
it's Fleet Ruler and Forecast  
at the wire.

it's evidently a photo.  
I walk to my car to get out of there  
before the crowd.

I have the radio  
on the race result station.  
I'm still on the Pasadena Freeway  
when I hear the result:  
it's Forecast  
and Forecast paid \$90.70  
so  
the day wasn't quite wasted.

but later  
when I pull into the driveway  
there's the Manx cat  
with his rudimentary tail and  
with his tongue hanging out.  
he refuses to move for the car.  
I get out

pick him up and  
throw him in the front seat.  
we drive into the garage  
together.

we get out  
the other two cats are waiting  
(lovers of fishheads, dreamers of  
birds)  
I open the door  
and all the cats enter along  
with me.

they run into the kitchen  
I notice that Dallas and San Diego are now  
playing. Danny White is at quarterback for  
Dallas.  
I always liked Danny White,  
he's a gambler.

I might watch a few quarters.  
Sunday's a day of rest.  
all important things should be forgotten.

I decide to not even feed the cats  
for a while.  
and Tuesday or Wednesday I'll start working  
on my childhood novel  
again.

## I live in a neighborhood of murder

the roaches spit out rusted  
paper clips  
and the helicopter circles and circles  
smelling for blood  
searchlights leering down into our  
bathrooms  
searching for our two-lid cache under the  
mattress.

5 guys in this court have pistols  
another a  
machete  
we are all murderers and  
alcoholics  
but there are worse in the hotel  
across the street;  
they sit in the green and white doorway  
banal and depraved  
waiting to be  
institutionalized.

here we each have a dying green plant  
on our porch  
and when we fight with our women at 3 a.m.  
we do so  
in hushed tones  
as outside on each porch  
stands a small dish of food  
that is always eaten by morning  
we presume  
by the  
cats.

## the bombing of Berlin

the Americans and English would come over, he told me,  
there was nothing to stop them,  
they had red and blue lights on their planes  
and they took their time,  
and it was funny, you know,  
a bomb would take out an entire block  
and leave the block next to it standing,  
untouched.

once, after a raid, we heard a piano playing  
under the rubble  
and there was an old woman under there playing the piano,  
the building had collapsed all around her,  
buried her there and she was still playing the  
piano.

after a while, when the planes came again and again  
we wouldn't bother to go underground anymore,  
we just stayed wherever we were  
on first and second floors and looked up  
and watched  
the red and blue lights and thought,  
goddamn them!

well, he said, picking up his beer with a sigh,  
we lost the war, and that's all there is to  
that.

## all right, Camus

met this guy, somewhere, hell his eyes looked like a madman's  
or maybe it was only my reflection there.  
well, anyway, he said to me, you read Camus?  
we're both in this womanless bar looking  
for a piece of ass or some way out through the top of the sky and  
it wasn't working—there was just the bartender wondering why he'd  
ever gone into the business  
and myself, very discouraged with the fact that I had now been trans-  
lated only  
into 6 or 7 languages.  
the guy kept talking—

*The Stranger*, you know, the book that depicts our modern society—  
about the deadened man who  
couldn't cry at his mother's funeral, who  
killed an Arab or two without even knowing why—

he kept on and on

and on and on  
telling me what a son-of-a-bitch *The Stranger*  
was, and I kept thinking maybe he's right—  
you know, those awful speeches before the French Academy—  
you couldn't tell whether Camus was talking out of the  
side of his mouth or  
whether he was  
serious. he certainly sounded no better than than  
the guy next to me at the bar  
and we were only looking for  
pussy.

it was very sad—  
all along *The Stranger* had been my hero  
because I thought he'd seen beyond trying  
or caring  
because it was all such a bore  
so senseless—  
life a big hole in the ground looking up—  
and I was wrong again:  
hell, I was *The Stranger* and the book simply hadn't come out the way  
it was meant to  
be.

## quits

they made their first mistake when they  
laid the champ  
facedown  
on the dressing room table—  
it was a cancer  
scream—

and then he cursed them in poor man's  
Italian and said  
turn me over turn me over turn me over you assholes  
turn me over,  
and they did  
and he said,  
he broke every rib on my left side  
he's a murderer, he's not a fighter,  
and then he  
said,  
look, get me a gun, I'm going to kill that son-of-a-  
bitch.

take it easy, champ, said his manager, it wasn't for the title, you  
still got the title. you can beat him  
in the rematch. we ain't signed the contract to  
fight Sondelle yet. we'll hold off on  
Sondelle and get this guy in the  
rematch.

I'm not fighting that killer again, said the  
champ,  
they ought to bar that dirty cocksucker from the  
ring.

look, champ, said his manager, don't be  
stupid, we'll get a real big  
gate for the next  
one, they'll want to see if he can  
do it again.

the champ cursed them in Italian and then said,  
you'll never get me in the ring with that  
killer again.

look, champ, he's a bum I tell you, a bum, he's never beat  
anybody before. next time you  
dance away, lay off the  
drinking and fucking for a  
week, he can't  
touch you when you're right. he can't beat  
shit, champ.

he beat  
me. I'll never take another beating like that for  
anyone.

you gonna quit, champ? you gonna quit?

I'll fight anyone but that  
guy.

all right

so, o.k., how about an X-ray of my  
ribs? I can't breathe, really, I  
feel them poking into my  
lung.

they took him out of there and drove him in a low  
long black  
limousine  
to the private hospital where the  
X-rays showed  
no breaks.

they're lying, screamed the champ, the fucking  
idiots are lying! don't you think I  
can feel my own bones when they are  
broken?

nobody said anything.

## Adolf

I have a friend who has a  
scrapbook devoted to Hitler  
and his Nazi buddies  
and the walls are  
covered with old  
snapshots of Al Capone  
Fatty Arbuckle  
Roy Rogers and  
many many others.  
the walls are limp with rotting glue  
and memories, and there are  
hidden switches that set off  
a frenzy of colored  
lights—  
each pattern different,  
never  
the same—  
and down in his cellar there are  
tons of rain-fattened and rat-  
eaten  
papers; it's very  
dark down there  
and there are many  
half-finished paintings with  
one eye staring up at you  
from the floor.  
we leave and  
go up a  
syphilitic staircase and back into  
the kitchen where  
a hog's head is swimming  
in a very large white

pot along with  
onions  
carrots  
potatoes,  
one small onion floating in an  
empty eye,  
and there's his  
daughter  
2 and one half feet tall  
who remembers me  
from another  
day.  
she says some genuine funny things  
to us  
then walks away into an  
upstairs  
bedroom  
while her father and I sit around  
listening to old German  
marching songs  
and smoking  
Picayunes.

## the anarchists

one time I began sitting around my place  
with some fellows with long dark beards  
who were very intense.

many people come to see me but  
I usually roust them after a while.

none of them ever bring women,  
they hide their women.

I drink beer and listen, but not too  
attentively.

but this particular crowd kept coming  
back. to me it was mostly beer and  
chatter. I noticed that they  
usually arrived in a caravan and had  
some central yet confused organization.

I kept telling them that I didn't give  
a fuck—either about America or about  
them. I just kept sitting there and each  
morning when I awakened they'd be gone—  
and that was best.

finally they stopped coming and a  
few months later I wrote a short story  
about their political chatter—which,  
of course, trashed their idealism.

the story was published somewhere and  
about a month later the leader walked  
in, sat down and split a six-pack.

“I want to tell you something, Chinaski,  
we read that story. we held a council  
and took a vote on whether to murder  
you or not. you were spared, 6 to 5.”

I laughed then, some years ago,  
but I no longer laugh. and even

though I paid for most of the beer and  
even though  
some of you fellows pissed on the  
toilet lid, I now appreciate that  
extra vote.

## perfect white teeth

I finally bought a color tv  
and the other night  
I hit on this movie  
and here's a guy in  
Paris  
he has no money  
but he wears a very good suit  
and his necktie is knotted perfectly  
and he's neither worried nor drunk  
but he's in a café  
and all the beautiful women are  
in love with him  
and somehow he keeps paying his rent  
and walking up and down staircases  
in very clean shirts  
and he advises a few of the girls  
that while they can't write poetry  
he can  
but he doesn't really feel like it  
at the moment—  
he's looking for Truth instead.  
meanwhile he has a perfect haircut  
no hangover  
no nervous tics around the eyes and perfect  
white teeth.

I knew what would happen:  
he'd get the poetry, the women and  
the Truth.

I popped off the tv set  
thinking, you dumb-ass son-of-a-bitch  
you deserve  
all  
three.

## 4 blocks

I drove my daughter to the school auditorium  
where her mother was to meet her  
at 5 p.m.

I let her out of the car  
and she reached her head back through the window  
and kissed me  
as she always did.  
she was 8. I was 52.

two fat women stood watching us.

I waved goodbye to my daughter  
and as she walked to the doorway  
one of the fat women asked her,  
“wait a minute, who was that man?”  
and she answered, “that’s my daddy.”  
then one of the fatsos ran toward me:  
“wait a minute, can I get a ride, just 4  
blocks?”

“I have a very dirty car,” I said.

“I don’t mean to intrude,” she said,  
getting in,  
“just follow the road. it’s not far.”  
I followed the road.

“Marina,” she said, “is a very nice girl, we  
all like Marina.”

“yes,” I said, “she’s a very quiet and  
gentle girl.”

“yes,” she answered, “yes, she is.”  
“I’m usually very quiet and gentle too,”  
I said.

“well,” she replied, “I guess if you don’t  
praise yourself, nobody else will, hahaha!”

"it's quite windy today," I said.

"now," she said, "go two blocks north, then turn right."

"all right," I said, "I will."

"I hope," she said, "that I'm not taking you too far out of your way? I hope that I'm not intruding?"

"have you met Marina's mother?" I asked.

"oh yes," she said, "she's a lovely person, quite a lovely person."

"are you sure somebody else will?" I asked.

"will what?" she asked.

"praise you if you don't praise yourself," I replied.

"well," she said, "it's 3 more blocks, then you take a right."

I ran up 3 blocks and took a right.

"now," she said, "see that truck with the gate hanging open?"

"I see it," I said.

"you just park right there by that truck and I'll get out."

I parked there and she got out.

"I sure want to thank you," she said,  
"and I hope I didn't intrude."

"I'll see you around," I said,  
"take care of yourself."

I drove ahead and took another right  
onto a one-way street. the ocean was  
down there. there was not a sailboat  
in sight. vaguely I wondered about  
flying fish  
dismissed them as a myth  
spun my car around  
at the first opportunity  
and headed back  
to Los Angeles.

**you can't force your way through  
the eye of the needle**

tearing up poems is my  
specialty.  
on a given night  
I will write between 5 and a  
dozen  
feeling very good about  
all of  
them.

the next day  
in the cold morning  
light  
I face them  
again:  
some have  
at best  
only a decent line or  
two.

to rip and basket  
these failures  
is pure  
pleasure.

there are some  
days  
when all of them  
go.

the poem is hardly the  
core of our

existence  
although  
there have been many  
poets  
who felt that  
it  
was.

*whatever they are,  
the gods are not  
dumb.  
they must laugh  
and wonder  
at our  
fever for  
fame.*

## two kinds of hell

I sat in the same bar for 7 years, from 6 a.m.  
until 2 a.m.

sometimes I didn't remember going back  
to my room.

it was as if I was sitting on that bar stool  
continuously.

I had no money but somehow the drinks kept  
coming.

I wasn't the bar clown but rather the  
bar fool.

but often a fool can find an even greater  
fool to  
treat him to drinks.  
fortunately,  
it was a crowded  
place.

but I *had* a point of view: I was waiting for  
something extraordinary to  
happen.

but as the years drifted past  
nothing ever did unless I  
caused it:

a broken bar mirror, a fight with a 7-foot  
giant, a dalliance with a lesbian,  
the ability to call a spade a spade and to

settle arguments that I did not  
begin, and etc.

one day I just upped and left.

just like that.

and as I began to drink alone I found my own company  
more than satisfactory.

then, as if the gods were annoyed by my peace of  
mind, the ladies began knocking at my door.  
the gods were sending ladies to the  
fool!

the ladies arrived one at a time and when one left  
the gods immediately—without allowing me any respite—would send  
another.

and each seemed at first to be a fresh miracle, but then everything  
that at first seemed wonderful ended up  
badly.

my fault, of course, yes, that's what they usually told  
me.

the gods just won't let a man drink alone; they are jealous of  
simple pleasures; so they send a lady to  
knock upon your door.  
I remember all those cheap hotels; it was as if all the women  
were one; the first delicate rap on the wood and then,  
“oh, I heard you playing that *lovely music* on your radio. we're

neighbors. I'm down in 603 but I've never seen you in  
the hall before!"

"come on in."

and there went your sanctity.

you also remember the time when  
you walked up behind the 7-foot giant and knocked off his  
cowboy hat, yelling,  
"I'll bet you're too tall to suck your mother's  
nipples!"

and somebody in the bar saying, "hey, sir, forget it, he's a mental  
case, he's an asshole, he doesn't know what he is  
saying!"

"I know EXACTLY what I am saying and I'll say it again,  
'I'll bet you were too tall . . .' "

he won the fight but you didn't die, not the way you died inside after  
the gods arranged for all those ladies to come knocking at your door.

the fistfight was more fair: he was slow, stupid and even a little  
bit frightened and the battle went well enough for you for quite a while,  
just like it did at first with those ladies the gods  
sent.

the difference being, I decided, I at least had a chance with the  
ladies.

## my faithful Indian servant

I reached over to turn on  
the lights. the lights were already  
on. I was in a bad way. "Hudnuck!"  
I bawled for my faithful Indian  
servant. "kiss my sack," he answered.  
in the dim light  
I saw him on the couch with  
my wife. I stepped outside  
and blew my bugle.  
3 camels answered my call, and came  
running across the yard.  
"Hudnuck!" I bawled.  
"hold your horses, daddy-o," he answered,  
"until I'm finished."  
I blew my bugle. nothing happened.  
it was full of spit and  
tears.  
Hudnuck stepped out on the  
porch, pulling his zipper closed.  
"I want a raise," he said,  
"I'm working for nothing."  
"and I'm living for nothing, Hud:  
don't you realize that  
I'm a broken man?"  
"don't talk that way," he said,  
"you've got a nice wife."  
my wife stepped out on the  
porch. "what are you having  
for breakfast, darling?" she  
asked.  
"bacon and eggs," I answered.  
"not you, you fool! she snapped.

"t-bone and liver sausage," said Hudnuck.

"thank you, darling," said my nice wife, going back into our nest.

I blew my bugle. a crow answered.

Hudnuck ripped the bugle from my hand. he wiped it across the front of my best shirt. (he was wearing it.)

he played "Hearts and Flowers" on the damn thing. the tears welled up in my eyes.

I decided to give him a raise. looking over, I saw him twisting my bugle into the shape of a cross as he whistled "It Ain't Gonna Rain No More."

he had strong, sensitive, beautiful hands. I looked down at my own. at first I couldn't find them. then quickly I took them out of my pockets and applauded him.

## a plausible finish

there ought to be a place to go  
when you can't sleep  
or you're tired of getting drunk  
and the grass doesn't work anymore,  
and I don't mean to go  
to hash or cocaine,  
I mean a place to go to besides  
the death that's waiting  
or to a love that doesn't work  
anymore.

there ought to be a place to go  
when you can't sleep  
besides to a tv set or to a movie  
or to buy a newspaper  
or to read a novel.

it's not having that place to go to  
that creates the people now in madhouses  
and the suicides.

I suppose what most people do  
when there isn't any place to go  
is to go to some place or to something  
that hardly satisfies them,  
and this ritual tends to sandpaper them  
down to where they can somehow continue even  
without hope.

those faces you see every day on the streets  
were not created  
entirely without  
hope: be kind to them:  
like you  
they have not  
escaped.

## **another one of my critics**

I haven't written a good poem  
in weeks. she's 15  
and she walks in.  
"bastard, when are you going to get  
out of bed?"  
it's ten minutes to noon  
so I get up and walk to the typewriter.  
she walks up in a Yankees baseball cap and  
stares at me.  
"DON'T BUG ME!" I scream. "I AM WRITING!"  
"imbecile," she says and walks off.

staring at that sheet of white paper  
I begin to think that some of my critics are  
right.  
she walks into the room again and looks at  
me.  
"blubbermouth," she says, "hello, blubbermouth."  
I ignore her.  
she reaches up and tugs at my beard.  
"hey, when you gonna take that mask off?  
I'm sick of that mask."  
then she goes to the bathroom  
and with the door open she sits on the pot.  
she strains: "urrg, urrg, urrg . . ."  
I look over.  
"listen, you're supposed to  
close the bathroom  
door when you do that."  
"well, close it then, dummy," she says.  
I get up and close it.

I know a writer who spent 2 thousand dollars  
to have a cork-lined room built for  
himself but it still didn't improve his  
work. I think I'll take my chances  
this way.

## fog

worst fog

I ever saw

was driving back from  
the beach  
with my buddy Desmond  
when  
it came  
in

it was so thick  
you  
could cut it with  
your proverbial  
knife.

and we were quite  
drunk

we couldn't pull  
over because  
we were afraid of  
hitting cars already parked  
at the  
curb

but we stopped a  
moment and  
Desmond climbed up  
on the hood  
and knelt there

and said, "o.k.,  
let's go, I'll  
guide you!"

and I started  
up and  
Desmond yelled,  
"SHIT! I CAN'T  
SEE ANYTHING!"  
and he began  
laughing and I  
began laughing

I could barely  
see his ass  
bunched up there on  
the hood

and then he  
said it  
again: "SHIT!  
I CAN'T SEE  
ANYTHING!"

and we both began  
laughing again  
harder

a laughter we  
couldn't stop

the fog all  
around us  
as we drove  
on

we just kept  
driving and  
laughing

we slipped through  
intersection after  
intersection  
often hearing  
engines and horns  
but seeing  
nothing  
until at one  
intersection the  
fog lifted a  
bit

I could make out  
a gas station  
a café  
there was a  
green light

and  
Desmond was  
missing

I pulled over  
and parked in the  
gas station and  
waited

and there came  
Desmond walking up  
through the  
fog

I hollered and  
waved and he saw  
me

ran to the car  
and got in

we drove on into  
L.A.

a week later  
he went to  
Illinois to see  
the wife he  
had  
split with

and I never  
saw him  
again.

**free?**

there's an airline  
they offer free champagne  
but I've been there  
before.

when the stewardess came by  
I said, no.

it was warm and  
it came right out of the  
bottle.

the stewardesses went up and down  
pouring refills.

it was a smooth flight  
but then it  
began:  
restroom runs.

lines formed.  
the barf bags came  
out.

I sat there  
listening to the  
moaning and the  
puking.

when we got to the airport  
some were still  
going at  
it.

some puked as they waited for their  
baggage. others puked on the  
escalators and in the parking lot.  
some puked in their cars while  
driving home. some were still puking at  
home.

when I got home  
I switched on the news  
opened a cold beer  
and let the bath water  
run.

## imported punch

they keep bringing fighters up  
from Brazil and Argentina  
with records like 11–2–1 or  
7–4–0  
and they're all 27 or 28 years  
old  
and they put them in with  
our boys  
with records like  
22–0–0,  
ages 21 or  
22.

the Brazilians and Argentines  
fight proudly  
and  
they hardly lack  
guts  
but they are built  
short and slow  
still use boxing  
techniques that went out  
in the  
twenties.  
it's more than sad  
and I wonder what  
these Brazilians and  
Argentines think  
after they are  
bloodied  
and then  
k.o.'d?

it's just  
another dumb fucking flight  
back to South America  
for them  
as they pass their  
compatriots  
flying North  
with no chance  
at all.

## it was an UNDERWOOD

my poems keep renouncing each  
other—

this one says this  
and that one says that,  
and the other says something else  
but I find it humorous  
as they battle back and  
forth—

angry featherweights, well,  
maybe welterweights,  
and then I walk into a stationery store—  
after all that furious battle—  
look at the typewriter ribbons  
and can't remember  
the name of  
the machine.

even my typewriter  
renounces itself—

“pardon me,” I squeeze by the girl at the  
register, “they didn’t have  
what I wanted.”

then I walk across the way  
where they do  
and buy 6 of those  
brews that made  
Milwaukee  
famous.

## the creation coffin

the ability to suffer and endure,  
that's nobility, friend.

the ability to suffer and endure  
for an idea, a feeling, a way,  
that's art, my friend.

the ability to suffer and endure  
when love fails,

that's hell, old friend.  
nobility, art and hell,  
let's talk about art for a while.

destiny is my crippled daughter.  
look here, it's difficult,  
me against them,  
with them.

Kafka, let me in!  
Hemingway beware!  
Hegel, you're funny!  
Cervantes, you mean you wrote that  
novel at the age of  
80?

great writers are indecent people  
they live unfairly  
saving the best part for paper.

good human beings save the world  
so that bastards like me can keep creating art,  
become immortal.  
if you read this after I am long dead  
it means I made it.

so writers of the world  
it's your turn now  
to misuse your wife  
abuse your children  
love thyself  
live off the funds of others  
dislike all art created before and  
during your time,  
and dislike or even hate humanity  
singly or en masse.

bastards, even if you read this  
after I am long dead  
forget about me. I  
probably wasn't that  
good.

## the 7 horse

two old guys behind me are talking.

“look at the 7 horse. he’s 35-to-1.

how can he be 35-to-1?”

“yeah, he looks good to me too,” says  
the other old guy.

“let’s bet him.”

they get up to make their bets.

I’ve already bet. I’ve got 40-win  
on the 2nd favorite.

I win four days out of five at the  
racetrack. it doesn’t seem to be  
a problem.

I open my newspaper, read the financial  
section, get depressed, turn to the front  
page looking for robbery, rape, murder.

the two old men are back.

“look, the 7 horse is 40-to-1 now,”  
says one of them.

“I can’t believe it!” says the  
other.

the horses are loaded into the gate, the  
flag goes up, the bell rings, they break  
out.

it's a mile-and-one-sixteenth, they  
take the first turn, go down the backstretch,  
circle the last turn, come down the homestretch, get  
to the finish line.

the 2nd favorite wins by a neck, pays  
\$7.80. I make \$116.00.

there is silence behind me.  
then one of the old men says, "the 7 horse  
didn't run at all."

"nope," says the other, "I don't understand  
it."

"maybe the jock didn't try," says  
his friend.

"that must be it," says  
the other.

like most others in the world  
they believe that failure  
is caused by some factor  
besides themselves.

I watch the two old guys as they  
bend over their Racing Form  
to make a selection in the  
next race.

"gee, look at this!" says one of them.

"they got Red Rabbit 10-to-1  
on the morning line. he looks better  
than the favorite."

"let's bet him," says the other old  
guy.

they leave their seats and move gently to the  
betting window

## **the suicide**

I had recently buried a woman I lived with  
for three years  
was between jobs  
my teeth rotting in my mouth  
(I burned away the pain with aspirin and  
beer).

I was sitting on the broken couch  
watching evening change into night  
when the phone rang.

it was Morrie.

“yes, Morrie?”

“listen, Mark’s here. he says he’s got to  
see you! he says he’s going to commit  
suicide!”

“put him on . . .”

“no, he can’t talk, he’s over the  
edge!”

I stepped on a passing roach.  
“give me your father,” I told him.

Bernie took the wire.  
“listen, Bernie,” I said, “what’s this  
bullshit about Mark?”

“it’s true! he said that if you don’t  
get over here now he’s going to kill himself!  
he needs help, Hank!”

“you think he’s really going to  
do it?”

“I wouldn’t kid about a thing like  
this!”

“it’s a long way to San Bernardino.”

“it’s only 50 miles! you can make it  
in 45 minutes.”

“all right, Bernie . . .”

I finished my beer, walked to my  
12-year-old car.  
it started and I got on the  
freeway.

it was a long, drab, stupid ride.

Mark was one of those people who  
always insisted that our friendship  
was real  
no matter how much effort I  
exerted to  
stay away from him.

I finally pulled up in front of the house.

I got out of the car, knocked.

Morrie answered the door.  
he had a head tic.  
when something upset him his  
head started jumping.

it was jumping all over in  
the doorway.  
“Mark’s been staying with us,”  
he said, “for the last couple of  
weeks.”

I walked in.

Mark was sitting on the couch  
holding a beer.  
he smiled at me.  
he was dressed in Bernie’s old  
bathrobe.  
he didn’t look  
as if he was  
contemplating  
suicide.

“where’s your father?” I asked  
Morrie.

“he went to sleep. he went to bed. he isn’t feeling good.”

“it’s only 7:30.”

“he isn’t feeling good.”

I sat down. there was a fire going in the fireplace.

“how about a beer?” Morrie asked, his head jumping.

“sure. where’s your mother?”

“she’s not home.”

Mark cleared his throat. then, in his quiet voice he began to talk *about his writing*: he was now into serial killers. he had written a novel. he had an agent. he’d been over to see her that afternoon. she had a swimming pool. they had had a swim together in her pool. she was a looker with great connections. she realized that his writing was exceptional. she was going to take over his career and make him famous and . . .

I tuned him out as he went on and on.  
he was wearing a silk scarf around his fat  
neck.

I finished my beer and Morrie jumped up,  
head bobbing, and got me another.

then I heard Mark's voice again. "*your  
writing reminds me a great deal of my  
own!*"

Morrie gave me the beer. I took a  
good hit and looked into the fire. a  
piece of wood cracked in the moment, a  
red spark broke off, shot up, fell  
back.

it was nice. it was nice and somehow  
reassuring.

"I'd like you to read a chapter from my  
novel," Mark said. "do you have that blue  
folder, Morrie?"

Morrie had it. he placed it carefully on my  
lap.

I opened it, went to the first page  
and began reading . . .

Mark couldn't write, never could.  
I read on, my teeth beginning to ache.  
I asked Morrie,

"you got any whiskey?"

Morrie went for it as Mark sat straight  
up in Morrie's old bathrobe, waiting  
for my words of praise.

I would find a way of letting him down easily  
I hoped  
without lying.

the whiskey came and I gulped it down  
went on reading  
drinking  
watching the fire.

Morrie's head kept leaping.

why do some individuals never realize how  
wearisome they are?  
or do they know and simply don't  
care?

I read on, hopeless-  
ly.

## **overcast**

I went to see my daughter.  
she's eleven and had just  
taken a bath and she was getting  
dressed in the closet so I  
wouldn't see her, and her  
mother said, "you know, you like  
to make this thing about your  
women into a great big drama;  
you love it, you love them  
fighting and screaming over  
you, you think it's humorous,  
don't you?"

"now, baby . . ." I said.

"some day a woman is going to  
put a knife into your heart,  
you're going to be killed and  
while you're dying you're going  
to say, 'you stuck that thing  
into me too far!'"

my daughter came out, fully  
clothed, and I told her mother  
that I'd bring her back in  
3 hours.

about 4 miles away we found  
a place to eat.

my daughter had a hamburger  
sandwich and milk.

I had fried shrimp with  
soup, fries, plus coffee.

we ate, I tipped the waitress,  
I paid the cashier, then  
we went out and got into my  
car. it was a dark day, low  
clouds, you couldn't see any  
sun. "your mother," I told her  
as we drove off, "is nothing  
but a wiseass."

## the final word

always in the poem  
we fall short.

ah,  
to say the final word  
you must  
kill the fish,  
throw away the  
head and tail  
(especially the eyes)  
and eat the rest.

there is this hunger  
to drive down the road  
looking for it  
in a 1998 Cadillac,  
trees along the road,  
a dung-spotted moon,  
and to run it down  
and get out and  
look at it,  
hold it in your hand  
and look at it,  
examine it  
(especially the eyes)  
then throw it all away  
and  
Cadillac off.

## fingernails; nostrils; shoelaces

the gas line is leaking, the bird is gone from the cage, the skyline is dotted with vultures;  
Benny finally got off the stuff and Betty now has a job as a waitress; and

the chimney sweep was quite delicate as he giggled up through the soot.

I walked miles through the city and recognized nothing as a giant claw ate at my stomach while the inside of my head felt airy as if I was about to go mad.

it's not so much that nothing means anything but more that it keeps meaning nothing,

there's no release, just gurus and self-appointed gods and hucksters.

the more people say, the less there is to say.

even the best books are dry sawdust.

I watch the boxing matches and take copious notes on futility.

then the gate springs open again and there are the beautiful silks and powerful horses riding against the sky.

such sadness: everything trying to break through into blossom.

every day should be a miracle instead of a machination.

in my hand rests the last bluebird.

the shades roar like lions and the walls  
rattle, dance around my  
head.

then her eyes look at me, love breaks my  
bones and I  
laugh.

## **after receiving a contributor's copy**

carping little kettle-fish  
griping over your wounds  
found in these misprinted pages,  
and still looking for sponsors  
lovers  
mothers  
easy fame:  
which one of you  
did I see through a  
frozen Denver restaurant window  
eating apple pie?  
which one of you  
rode to East Hollywood on a bloodhound  
hunting your wet nurse?  
which one of you then knocked  
on my door  
wanting to talk about POETRY?

which one of you is vain enough  
and miserable enough  
and sick enough  
to suck an editor's ass?

which one of you goes  
to all the lit parties  
and reads his stuff to  
tapeworms?

which one of you thinks  
he's Pound, or Shelley  
on a blue butterfly?

which one of you  
changed my poem to read  
the way you THINK  
a poem should read?

which one of you mewed in  
sick, friendly sentiment  
like larvae crawling the  
body of my mind?

and this may seem strong  
and unfair,  
for I say let everyone live  
and write  
who wants to live and write,  
but which one of you  
lives with his mother or his aunt,  
which one of you first  
puts talcum on his butt  
and then climbs up on  
the cross?

which one of you  
(one a university prof  
I once chastised  
for senseless abstraction)  
which one of you now  
writes about whores and drinking  
and has never been to bed with a woman,  
and has never drunk  
more than a small brown beer?

and which one of you  
writes with a dictionary against his belly  
like buggering an unabridged cow?

which one of you grinds his soul  
to Bach's organ  
like a monkey on a string?

which one of you  
hates the wife that feeds you?  
not because she's human  
but because  
she doesn't like your stuff.

which one of you  
couldn't hit a baseball?  
which one of you  
has never been in jail?

which one of you?  
which one of you?  
which one of  
you?

## **poor night**

I think I'm in the first  
dry period of my life.

nearing 62  
one fears senility and  
an end  
to the luck.

I slowly drink  
two large glasses of wine  
and stare  
at the white page.

it has always come so  
easily.

I have always laughed at  
writers who claimed that  
creation was  
painful.

I change stations  
on the radio, pour  
another wine.

“papa,” she opens the  
door, “do you have any  
matches?”

“sure,” I say and  
hand her a couple of  
books.

she leaves.

Henry Miller is dead.

Saroyan. Jeffers.

Nelson Algren.

They've all been dead now  
for some time.

"papa," she returns,  
"this pen I'm using is  
terrible. do you have  
another pen?"

"sure," I say and  
hand her a good  
one.

"there is too much smoke  
in this room!"

she opens a window.

"you should let some of  
the smoke out!"

"you're right,"  
I say.

she leaves  
and I like her  
concern

but then I am alone  
with my blank page  
again.

a) so then  
I wrote this down to  
fill in the blank  
space.

b) then came the decision  
whether to tear it up or  
save it.

c) have  
I done  
the right thing?

## **you write many poems about death**

yes, and here's another one  
and later it might even end up in one of my  
books.

and  
the book will be sitting on a  
shelf  
waiting for you  
long after I am  
gone.

think of that:  
in a sense I will be speaking again  
just to you.

and remember this:  
the page you are looking at  
now,  
I once typed the words  
with care  
with you in mind  
under a yellow  
light  
with the radio  
on.

if you think about death  
long enough  
I have found  
it belongs  
it makes sense  
just like

this typewriter

this matchbook

this paper clip

and

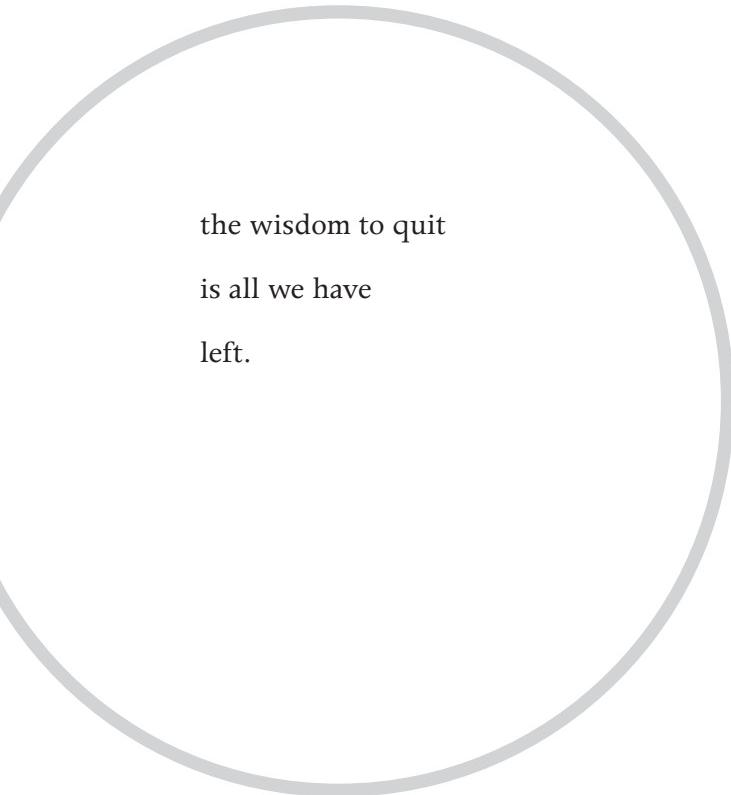
the next page

and the next poem

after this

one.

## four



the wisdom to quit  
is all we have  
left.



## **dog**

is much admired by Man  
because he believes in  
the hand which feeds  
him. a  
perfect  
setup. for  
13 cents a  
day you've got  
a hired killer  
who thinks  
you are  
God. a  
dog can't tell a Nazi from a  
Republican from a Commie from  
a Democrat. and, many times,  
neither can I.

## the hatred for Hemingway

I gave Hemingway's last book

*Islands in the Stream*

a bad review

while most others gave him

good reviews.

but the hatred for Hemingway

by the unsuccessful writer

especially the female writer

is incomprehensible to me.

this unsuccessful female writer was in a rage.

I had tried to explain why I thought

Hemingway wrote as

he did.

that life-through-death bit, she said,

is not at all unique with

Hemingway. what else is our

whole Western culture about? it's the same story

over and over

again. no news

there!

that's true, I thought, but . . .

shooting lions only meant shooting

himself? she asked. does it? does

it? not when those lions were unarmed and

he was coming at them with a rifle and

didn't even have to

come close. really! poor little Heming-

way.

it's true, I thought, the lions don't carry  
rifles.

the Spanish tradition. I can see Goya because he comes  
through as real and complete, she said. I can't see  
Hemingway as anything but an old Hollywood movie  
acted out by . . . what's his name? that Cooper who was a friend  
of his—the *High Noon* guy. oh wow!

she doesn't even like his friends,  
I thought.

you learn about death by dying  
not by looking at it,  
she said.

that's true, I thought, but then  
how do you write about it?

you say Shakespeare bores you, she said—  
the fact is  
he knew far more than Hemingway—  
Hemingway never got to be more than a  
journalist.

taught to write by Gertrude Stein, I thought.

he told you what he saw, she said, but he didn't know  
what it *meant*—how things really  
relate . . . he never  
*explained*.

that's strange, I thought, that's exactly what I  
liked about  
him.

you talk a lot of typical  
crap, she said.

what a shame, I thought,  
she has such long beautiful  
legs. well, Goya was all right too,  
but you can't go to bed with  
Goya.

well, all right, I thought, Hemingway pulled those big fish  
out of the sea and endured a few wars  
and watched bulls die and shot some  
lions;  
wrote some great short stories  
and gave us 2 or 3  
good early  
novels;  
on his last day  
Hemingway waved to  
some kids going to school,  
they waved back, and he never touched the orange juice  
sitting there in front of him;  
then he stuck that gun into his mouth like a soda straw  
and touched the trigger  
and one of America's few immortals  
was blood and brain across the walls and  
ceiling, and then they all smiled,  
they smiled and said,

ah, a fag! ah, a coward!  
yes, he took advantage of McAlmon  
he took advantage of everybody  
and he didn't treat Fitzgerald right  
and he typed standing up  
and he was once in a mental  
hospital,  
and Gertie Stein, that friggin'  
dyke,  
maybe she did  
teach him how to  
write.

but who convinced him that it was time to die?

you did, you  
dirty  
fuckers.

## looking at the cat's balls

sitting here by the window  
sweating beer sweat  
mauled by the summer  
I am looking at the cat's balls.

it's not my choice.  
he sleeps in an old rocker  
on the porch  
and from there he looks at me  
hung to his cat's balls.

there's his tail, damned thing,  
hanging out of the  
way so I can  
view his furry storage tanks but  
what can a man think about  
while looking at a cat's nuts?  
certainly not about the sunken navy after a  
great sea battle.  
certainly not about a program to save the  
poor.  
certainly not about a flower market or a dozen  
eggs.  
certainly not about a broken light switch.

balls iz balls, that's all,  
and most certainly that's true about  
a cat's balls.  
my own are rather soft and mushy and  
I'm told by my current lady  
*quite* large:  
“you've got big balls, Chinaski!”

but the cat's balls:  
I can't figure whether he's hung to them  
or whether they're hung to him.  
you see, there is this almost nightly battle for  
the female  
and it doesn't come easy for either of us.

look:  
a piece is missing from his left ear.  
once I thought one of his eyes had been  
clawed out  
but when the dried  
blood peeled away  
a week later  
there was his pure  
gold-green eye  
looking at me.

his entire body is scarred from bites  
and the other day,  
attempting to pet his head  
he yowled and almost bit me—  
the skin on his skull  
had been split to reveal the bone.  
it certainly doesn't come easy for any of us,  
poor fellow.

he sleeps  
now dreaming  
what?  
a fat mockingbird in his mouth?  
or surrounded by female cats in heat?

he dreams his daydreams  
and we'll find out  
tonight.

good luck, old fellow,  
it doesn't come easy,  
hung to our balls we are, that's it,  
we're captive to our balls,  
and I should use a little restraint myself  
when it comes to the ladies.  
meanwhile I will  
watch their eyes and lead with the left jab  
and run like hell  
when it just isn't any use  
anymore.

## contributors' notes

WENDELL THOMAS teaches creative writing every summer at Ohio State University. His recent credits include *Lick*, *Out of Sight*, *Entrails* and many other important small mags.

RICHARD KWINT recently moved from South Carolina to Delaware. He is now divorced and is currently working on several one-act plays.

TALBERT HAYMAN has appeared in over 23 anthologies. His 3rd chapbook of poems *Winter Driven Light of Night* will be published by the Bogbelly Press later this fall. He is on the faculty of Princeton Day School in N.J.

WILLIAM PREWIT has been widely published in the little mags. He lives with his aunt, his daughter (Margery-Jean), his wife and his tomcat (Kenyon) in upper New Jersey.

BLANDING EDWARDS founded the little magazine *Roll Them Bones*.

PATRICIA BURNS is a genius. She teaches at Princeton Day School in N.J.

ALBERT STICHWORT has worked as a dishwasher, veterinarian, lumberjack, hotwalker, stevedore, motorcycle policeman; he studied under Charles Olson and once fought four rounds with Joe Louis. He has lived in Paris, Munich, London, Arabia and Africa. He is presently studying Creative Writing at the University of Southern California.

NICK DIVIOGONNI rides her horse every day and teaches summer classes at Montclair State Jr. College in N.J.

PETER PARKS teaches at Princeton Day School in N.J.

MARCEL RYAN once shaved the hair off the balls of Jean-Paul Sartre.

PETER FALKENBERG is the father of 3 children and has worked as a janitor, payroll clerk and as an attendant in a mental hospital.

VICTOR BENNETT has appeared in the *North American Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Quixote*, *Meatball*, *Wormwood Review*, *Hearse*, *Harper's*, *Evergreen Review*, *Ramparts*, *Avant Garde*, *Northern Poetry Review*, *The Smith*, *The New York Times*, *Chelsea*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Atom Mind*, *Cottonwood Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Beloit Quarterly*, *Sun and Mummy*. He committed suicide November 9, 1972.

DARNBY TEMPLE is part owner of a Turkish bath.

STUART BELHAM masturbates 4 times a day.

HARLEY GABRIEL plans to teach English next year at Princeton Day School in N.J.

WILLIAM COSTWICK was born in 1900 in Yokohama, Japan.

MASH EDWARDS once raped a girl riding a bicycle. He has studied under Wendell Thomas, Albert Stichwort, Tyrone Douglas, Abbot Boyd, Peter Parks and many others. His main influence is Dame Edith Sitwell.

TANNER GROSHAWK is wanted for the murder of 4 high school students.

SASSON VILLON is a former friend of Victor Mature. He teaches at Princeton Day School in N.J.

VICTOR WALTER writes his poems with flaming fencing swords on the throats of vultures and hates television.

STUART BELHAM's wife, Tina, masturbates 4 times a day.

CARSON CRASWELL asks for no contributor's note.

TALBOT DIGGINS douses his 4-year-old daughter in scalding water once or twice a week. He edits the poetry newsletter *The Invisible Heart*.

PARKER BRIGGS is presently an "A" student at Montclair State Jr. College in N.J.

## on beer cans and sugar cartons

the ox, me,  
I am cold tonight  
this morning  
4 a.m.  
down to one can of beer and 2  
cigars;  
woman and child moving out  
Wednesday;  
the radio plays a Scottish air and  
the old stove muffs out  
gas, gas, gas,

if I could only sleep.  
I can't seem to sleep.

death doesn't always arrive like a bomb  
or a fat whore  
sometimes death crawls inch-by-inch  
like a tiny spider crawling on your belly  
while you  
sleep.

this is not news to you,  
I know that.

my skeleton hands pray tonight  
pray for something  
I don't know  
what.

my hands hold this cigar  
over my emptied  
dream.

I am  
kind of like a dirty joke  
told too often told too late  
when people can no longer  
laugh.

there is a box on the table.  
I read its label, it says:  
sugar measurements: 1 lb. powdered equals  
4 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  cups sifted; 1 lb. granulated equals  
2 and  $\frac{1}{2}$  cups, etc.

now, *there's* a new world! I sit and leer at the box,  
forgetting everything:  
General Grant  
pea soup  
etc.

the ox, me, I am cold tonight.  
tomorrow I will go to the grocery store and get empty cartons  
so they can pack up their  
stuff. the woman saves all kinds of letters, ribbons,  
photographs. the little girl, of course, has her  
little girl toys.

I need more to read. I read my beer can. it says:  
brewed of pure Rocky Mountain spring water

which turns to piss; brewed of flesh which  
turns into a meal for maggots;  
brewed of love which turns to nothing; my land and  
your land; my grave and your grave; a taste of  
honey; a night's dream of gold; I came this way for  
a while and then I left: brewed, screwed,  
borrowed, loaned and lied to in the name of  
Life.

I drink that beer.

I paid for  
it.

it is now 5:30 a.m. and many people have fucked and  
slept and are now coming up out of their small dreams as  
the man on the radio asks me if I want to borrow money on  
my home.

I can sleep on that. I can sleep thinking  
maybe the next time there are riots in the streets  
maybe they'll let me join them  
even though my skin is the wrong shade  
and while they are fighting for Cadillacs and  
color tvs  
I'll be fighting for something else—  
just what  
right now  
isn't clear to  
me.

but maybe when I awaken it will all be clear.

right now  
it's stub out the cigar  
wait for the grocery store to open and  
change these dirty  
shorts.

## **pay your rent or get out**

somewhere the dead princess  
lies with a new lover;  
I have only a few empty packs of  
fags left  
fished back out of nets of yearning  
but everything is fine  
except the color and demeanor  
of the wasp,  
the wax too red  
and a note from the woman  
on the hill  
who buys my paintings:  
“wondering about you. call  
me. love, R.,”  
and another note under the  
door:  
“pay your rent or get out.”  
the heater is on and  
there’s a pot of pure ground  
pepper facing me,  
and typewriter paper  
to fill with poems;  
everything is fine,  
sidewalks echo the click of  
heels,  
engines start,  
and I must wash these bloody  
diseased coffee cups;  
and I ask myself, how are you today, my  
friend?  
how’s it going? disappointed?  
unhappy?

me? it's tough. tough as a  
good poem,  
but I feel all right,  
and really,  
essentially, pretty soon I am  
going to eat  
either hash or stew, something  
out of a can.  
I also may lift weights and I  
hope  
I keep feeling o.k., although my  
radio is fuzzy  
and speaks of silly things like  
good jet service;  
it is now 7:30, and this is the  
way men  
live and die: not Eliot's way  
but  
my way, our way,  
quietly as a folded wing,  
hate burned out like a tube;  
the drapes are coming down  
torn by time  
and there is a knife to my left that  
couldn't even cut an onion  
but I don't have any onions to  
cut, and  
I hope you are feeling  
o.k. too.

## note on a door knocker

yeah? I said, is that  
so?

yes, he said, she lives in  
Malibu, I'm going to see her  
tonight.

ah, I said, has it been a  
long-term relationship?  
hell no, he said, I'm not a  
masochist.

he fingered his gold chain  
and talked about  
poetry. he talked about poetry  
for an  
hour.

I'm not a masochist either, I said,  
so will you get  
the hell out of  
here?

he left. but I knew he'd be  
back.

he talked about  
poetry. I wrote  
it.

he couldn't understand  
that it and we  
were not  
alike.

## the American Flag Shirt

now more and more  
all these people running around  
wearing the American Flag Shirt  
and it was more or less once assumed  
(I think but I'm not sure)  
that wearing an A.F.S. meant to  
say you were pissing on  
it  
but now  
they keep making them  
and everybody keeps buying them  
and wearing them  
and the faces are just like  
the American Flag Shirt—  
this one has this face and that shirt  
that one has that shirt and this face—  
and somebody's spending money  
and somebody's making money  
and as the patriots become  
more and more fashionable  
it'll be nice  
when everybody looks around  
and finds that they are all patriots now  
and therefore  
who is there left to  
persecute  
except their  
children?

## age

the decency of sweating in a rocker  
is reserved for old generals or ancient  
statesmen as afternoons ripe with young  
girls who have nothing to do but laugh and  
walk by.

for me  
when the fingers go the brain will go,  
there will be nothing to lift the  
glass and I will sit around thinking of  
white nightgowns and hookers  
and blocks of night with mice for eyes.

when the fingers fail the cup I have  
failed  
and the soul  
in an old brown bag  
will say goodbye  
like hedges say goodbye  
like cannons sit in parks wondering what  
next.

## the dogs bark knives

jesus christ the dogs bark knives  
and on the elevators  
tinkertoy men  
decide my life and my death;  
the falcons are cross-eyed  
and there is nothing to save;  
let us know the impossible  
let us know that strong men die in packs,  
let us know that love is bought and kept  
like a pet dog—a dog that barks knives  
or a dog that barks love;  
let us know that living out a life  
among billions of idiots with molecule feelings  
is an art in itself;  
let us know mornings and nights and  
perfidy;  
let us be gone with the swallow  
let us lynch the last hope  
let us find the graveyard of elephants  
and the graveyard of the mad;  
let those who sing songs of their own  
let them sing to the idiots and the liars  
and the planners of strategies  
in a game too dull for children;  
there is only one way to live  
and that is alone,  
and only one way to die, and that the same;  
I've heard the marching of their armies  
all these years;  
how tiresome—  
what they want and what they've won;  
how tiresome that they are my masters

and will probably follow me into death  
bringing more death to death;  
the whole way is hollow—  
I touch a small ring on my finger  
and breathe the beaten  
air.

## the hog in the hedge

you know, driving through this town or any town  
walking through this town or any town I see  
people with nostrils, fingers, feet,  
eyes, mouths, ears, chins, eyebrows and so forth.  
I go into a café, sit down and order breakfast,  
look around and I am conscious of skulls and skele-  
tons as I watch a man stick  
a piece of bacon into his mouth and die a little  
and I don't like to contemplate death because  
there *might* be someplace else we have to go later on  
and I've had enough trouble right here just being right here  
but  
maybe it's the fault of all the snakes in glass cages,  
they can't move, breathe or kill and they  
ought to let them out and they ought to empty the  
jails too just as soon as I get my luger in order and  
my dogs unleashed.

the buildings are all poorly constructed and the human  
body is too; I sometimes watch dancers leaping  
about and I think, that's ugly and awkward,  
the human body is constructed wrong, it's ungainly and  
stupid . . . compared to what? compared to the cactus  
and the leopard. well,  
my women have always said, "you're so *negative!*"  
and I've looked at them and replied, "I find real-  
ity negative." compared to what? *unreality*.  
yet for all that I have had more joy than any of  
them, they were *positive* and depressed, and I am *negative*  
and happy. well,

it all could be the fault of firemen sitting around waiting  
for a fire, it could be the fault of some guy in Moscow raping  
a 6-year-old girl, or it could be because fog is no  
longer fog the way it used to be—fresh, wet, cooling,  
but everything's hurting now. they found some guy playing  
football at U.C.L.A. who couldn't read or write  
but Christ he had strength, what a body, he might have  
slipped by but he got upset and murdered his drug  
dealer and they found out after all that he wasn't  
much of a college boy, just kind of a kept goldfish  
which reminds me

hardly anybody keeps goldfish anymore; you know when  
I was a kid, one household out of 3 had goldfish.  
what happened to that? some even had  
goldfish ponds in the backyard with slimy moss and  
dozens of goldfish, small, medium, large,  
they lived on bread crumbs and some of those fuckers got  
so fat and stupid they just rose to the top and flattened  
out, one eye to the sun, quits, like a bad message  
from God, but people also quit when they shouldn't.  
once there

was a prizefighter, got \$5 million for a championship fight,  
the Macho Man, had never been defeated but he ran into  
a guy who could handle him and after a few rounds he  
turned his back and said,  
“no mas.”  
you'd figure for \$5 million a man could stand a little  
pain, I've watched men have their entire lives destroyed for  
55 cents an hour or less.  
well,

maybe it's the masonry or maybe it's the water pump, or maybe it's the hog in the hedge, or maybe it's the end of luck. angels are flying low tonight with burning wings, your mother is the victim of her ordinary nightmares as 40 faucets drip, the cat has leukemia, there are only 245 days left until Christmas, and my dental technician hates me.

so now

I wake up with a stiff neck instead of a stiff  
dick and  
you

can always reach me here in  
east Hollywood but  
please please please  
don't  
try.

## I never bring my wife

I park, get out, lock the car, it's a perfect day, warm and easy, I feel all right, I begin walking toward the entrance and a little fat guy joins me. he walks at my side. I don't know where he came from.

"hi," he says, "how you doing?"

"o.k.," I say.

he says, "I guess you don't remember me. you've seen me maybe two or three times."

"maybe so," I say, "I'm at the track every day."

"I come maybe three or four times a month," he says.

"with your wife?" I ask.

"oh no," he says, "I never bring my wife."

"who do you like in the first?" he asks.

I tell him that I haven't bought my Racing Form yet.

we walk along and I walk faster. he struggles to keep up.

"where do you sit?" he asks.

I tell him that I sit in different places.

"that goddamned Gilligan," he says, "is the worst jock here. I lost a bundle on him the other day. why do they use him?"

I tell him that Whittingham and Longden think he's all right.

"sure, they're friends," he answers. "I know something about Gilligan. want to hear it?"

I tell him to forget it.

we are nearing the newspaper stand near the entrance and I slant off toward it as if I was going to buy a paper.

"good luck," I tell him and drift off.

he appears startled, his eyes look shocked, he reminds me  
of a woman who feels secure only when somebody's thumb is  
up her ass.

he looks around, spots a gray-haired old man with a  
limp, rushes up, catches stride with the old guy and begins  
talking to him.

I pay my way in, find a seat far from everybody, sit down.  
I have seven or eight good quiet minutes, then I hear a  
movement: a young man has seated himself near me, not next  
to me but one seat away although there are hundreds of  
empty seats.

another Mickey Mouse, I think. why do they always find  
me?

I keep working at my figures.

then I hear his voice: "Blue Baron will take the  
feature."

I make a note to scratch that dog and I look up and  
it seems that his remark was directed to me: there's  
nobody else within fifty yards.

I see his face.

he has a face women would love: utterly bland and  
blank.

he has remained almost untouched by circumstance, he's  
a miracle of zero.

I gaze upon him, enchanted.  
it's like looking at a lake of milk  
never rippled by even a pebble.

I look back down at my Form.

"who do you like?" he asked.

"sir," I tell him, "I prefer not to talk."

he looks at me from behind his perfectly trimmed black mustache, there is not one hair out of place;  
I've tried mustaches; I've never cared enough for mirrors to keep a mustache looking that unnatural.

he says, "I've heard about you. you don't like to talk to anybody."

I get up, take my papers, walk three rows down and sixteen seats over. I go to my last resort, take out my red rubber earplugs, jam them in.  
being my brother's keeper would only narrow me down to a brick-walled place  
where everything is the same.

I feel for the lonely, I sense their need, but I also feel that the lonely are for one another and that they should find each other and leave me alone.

so, plugs in, I miss the flag-raising ceremony, being deep into the Form.

I would like to be human  
if only they would let me.

going to the track is like going anywhere else except,  
generally speaking,  
there are more lonely people there, which doesn't help.  
they have a right to be there and I have a right to be there.  
this is a democracy and we are all part of one unhappy family.

## an interview at 70

the interviewer leans toward me, “some say that you are not as wild as you used to be.”

“well,” I say, “I can’t keep on forever writing poems about spilling beer into the laps of whores.

a man matures and moves on to other things.”

“but some still want the same old Chinaski!”

“and that’s just what they’ve got,” I say.

“tell us about the racetrack,” he suggests.

“there’s nothing to tell.”

“you have to wait until he gets mellow until after midnight to hear the really good stuff,” says my wife.

the interviewer is not  
used to waiting.  
he stares at his  
notes.  
he wants some  
grand statements, some  
grand conclusions,  
something grand to  
happen now.  
he is confused by his  
misconceptions and  
preconceptions.

and the worst thing  
about him?

he's not  
wild  
enough.

## 2 views

my friend says, how can you write so many poems  
from that window? I write from the womb,  
he tells me. the dark thing of pain,  
the featherpoint of pain.

well, this is very impressive  
only I know that we both receive a good many  
rejections, smoke a great many cigarettes,  
drink too much and attempt to steal each other's  
women, which is not poetry at all.

and he reads me his poems  
he always reads me his poem  
and I listen and do not say too much,  
I look out of the window,  
and there is the same street  
my street  
my drunken, rained-on, sunned-on,  
childrened-on street,  
and at night I watch this street  
sometimes  
when it thinks I am not looking,  
the 1 or 2 cars moving quietly,  
the same old man, still alive, on his  
nightly walk,  
the shades of houses down,  
love has failed but  
hangs on  
then lets go.  
but now it is daylight and children  
who will some day be old men and women  
walking through last moments,

these children run around a red car  
screaming their good nothings,  
then my friend puts down his poem.

well, what do you think? he asks.

try so and so, I name a magazine,  
and then oddly  
I think of guitars under the sea  
trying to play music;  
it is sad and good and quiet.  
he sees me standing at the window.  
what's out there?

look, I say,  
and see . . .

he is eleven years younger than I.  
he turns away from the window. I need a beer,  
I'm out of beer.

I walk to the refrigerator  
and the subject is closed.

## van Gogh and 9 innings

the battleship nights in Georgia  
when we all  
went down.

do you know? there was this Russian who  
leaped to music well enough to make you cry  
and he went insane  
and they put him someplace and fed  
him and  
shocked him with electric wires and cold water  
and then  
hot water and he wrote books about himself  
he couldn't read or  
remember.

out at the ball game  
in Atlanta  
I watched them hurrying, sweating,  
and I sat there thinking about the  
Dutchman  
(instead of the Russian)  
the Dutchman with the toothbrush  
stroke  
who never learned to properly mix his  
paints and who couldn't make even a  
whore love him  
and it all ended then  
for him and for the whore  
and he cut off his ear and continued to  
beg for paints  
and they write books about him  
now

but he's dead and can't read them  
and I saw some of his stuff at a  
gallery,  
last year—they had it roped off and  
guarded so you couldn't touch the  
work.

somebody won that ball game in Atlanta and the  
whore  
didn't want his  
ear.

## 9 a.m.

blazing as a fort blazes  
this first impromptu note—  
sunlight—  
foul betrayer  
breaking through kisses and perfume and nylon,  
showing a city of broken teeth  
and insane laws,  
bringing a ruined alley to the eye,  
this diamond in the rough;  
and inside my palm  
a small sore  
berry-red  
that even Christ w'd n't ignore  
as the ladies pass  
shifting their rotted gears  
and peppermint fences and spoiled dogs  
blazing as  
you burn;  
9 a.m. sunlight  
gives us apples and whores  
and now thankfully  
I can again remember  
when I was young  
when I walked in gold  
when rivers had mirrors  
and there was no end.

## **lousy day**

in the old days

after the races I would often end up with a  
high yellow or a crazy white in some motel  
room

but now I'm 70 and have to get up four times  
each night to piss

and about the only thing that really concerns me is  
freeway traffic.

today I dropped \$810.00 at the track and when  
I tried to enter the freeway a  
guy in a red Camaro almost ran me  
off the road (red automobiles have always  
annoyed me) so I swung after him, rode his  
bumper hard, then swung around and we rode side-by-  
side.

looking over at him I saw he was a slight young  
boy who looked like a cost accountant, so I ran  
my window down and screamed at him while  
honking, informing him that he was a piece  
of subnormal dung but he just continued to stare  
straight ahead so I hit the gas and left him  
behind and my next thought was, I wonder if I  
should tell my wife about this?

and then quickly a voice from somewhere  
answered, don't be a sucker, pal, she'll  
just turn it into an unflattering joke.

"oh, hahaha! he probably didn't even know  
you were there!"

if a man lives for 70 years he learns  
one or two things—the first being: don't confide unnecessarily

in your wife.  
the second being: others may sometimes  
understand you but  
none of them will understand you  
better than your wife  
does.

## **sadness in the air**

here I am alone sitting  
like some wimp

listening to Chopin

the night wind blowing in  
through the  
torn curtains.

won \$546 at the track today but  
now I'm thinking that  
dying is such a strange and  
ordinary thing.

I just hope that I'll never need  
false teeth before I  
go.

. . .

Wm. Holden cracked his head  
on a coffee table  
while drunk and  
bled to death;  
stiff and dead for 4 days  
before they found him.

I wonder how Chopin went?

things pass away, that's not  
news.

here in L.A.

I've seen so many good  
Mexican fighters  
come and go  
climbing through the  
ropes  
young and glistening with  
ambition  
and then  
vanish.

where do they go?  
where are they tonight  
as I listen to Chopin?

maybe I'm in a better  
business?

I don't think so.

writers go fast  
too  
they forget how to lead  
with a  
straight hard sentence

then they teach class  
write critical articles  
bitch  
get stale  
vanish.

. . .

Holden slipped on a  
throw rug  
his head hitting the  
nightstand  
he had a .22 alcohol  
blood count.

myself  
I've gone down  
many times usually  
over a telephone cord.

I hate telephones  
anyhow  
whenever one rings  
I jump.

people ask, "why do you  
jump when the telephone  
rings?"

if they don't know  
you can't tell them.

. . .

it's getting cold.  
I go to shut the window.  
I do.

Chopin continues.

when you drink alone  
like Wm. Holden  
sometimes you've got  
something on your mind  
that you can't tell  
anybody.

in many cases it's  
better to keep  
silent.

we were not put here to  
enjoy easy days and  
nights

and when the telephone  
rings  
you too will know that  
we're all  
in the wrong business

and if you don't know  
what that means  
you don't feel the  
sadness in the air.

## the great debate

he sent me his latest book.

I had once liked his writing  
very much.

he had been wonderfully crude, simple,  
troubled.

now he had learned how to gracefully  
arrange his words and thoughts  
on paper.

now he taught courses at the  
universities.

but I wondered about  
what?

his words were now  
very pale.

they spread across the page  
like a mist  
filling it  
but saying  
very little.

he didn't seem to be the  
same man.  
where had he gone?

why do  
such deaths seem  
mysterious?

it's well that  
new poets come along  
new quarterbacks  
new matadors  
new dictators  
new revolutionaries  
new butchers  
new pawnbrokers.  
because spiritual death arrives  
much more quickly and unexpectedly than  
physical demise.

I drop his new book  
into the wastebasket.  
I don't want it  
around.

he was now a  
successful writer  
which meant  
that his work  
no longer made  
anybody  
angry  
disgusted  
or sad.

never made

anybody

laugh

never made

anybody

feel that rush of wonder

while reading

it.

but in a world

where even

the disappearance

of the dinosaur

remains a mystery

we should accept

the mysterious fact of

the vanishing poet.

and when we accept

that

we are simply

making way for

our own final

invisibility.

## our deep sleep

I've always been a sucker for the  
old ones: Céline, Hemingway, Dreiser,  
Sherwood Anderson, e. e. cummings,  
Jeffers, Auden, W. C. Williams, Wallace Stevens,  
Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Carson  
McCullers . . . and some others.

Our current moderns  
leave me quite  
unsatisfied.  
there is neither lean nor  
fat in their efforts, no pace,  
no gamble, no joy.  
it's work reading them, hard  
work,  
there is much pretense  
and even some clever con  
behind their productions.

I have no idea what has  
happened to the creative  
writer since the 1940s.  
there has been a half century  
of utter pap.  
why?  
I don't know.  
I don't know.

there has been little to  
read  
for some time now.  
I have been able to

read only the newspapers  
and the  
Racing Form.

all those books printed,  
a million books  
printed  
and nothing to  
read.

a half century shot to  
shit.

we deserve nothing  
and that's what we have  
now.

## the sorry history of myself

this is a terrible way to live:  
surrounded by  
the ever-  
irascible,  
coldhearted and  
nearly mad.

but my early experiences were  
quite similar.

I should be adjusted to it  
all by now

from my angry boiling  
petty father  
to

the slew of females  
who came later  
all consumed by  
depression,  
useless rage,  
screeching and  
nonsensical  
self-  
pity.

happiness and simple joy  
for them all seemed to be  
simply diseases to be  
eradicated.

this history of  
myself:  
this terrible way to  
live.

but I feel I have now snatched  
victory  
from all the useless  
raging black  
hysteria.

I have now survived all  
that and  
they can club me with their  
angry lives and  
burn me on my  
deathbed

but somehow  
I have found a lasting  
peace  
they can never  
take  
away.

## law

look, he told me,  
all those little children dying in the trees,  
and I said, what?  
and he said, look,  
and I went to the window  
and sure enough, there they were hanging in the trees,  
dead and dying,  
and I said, what does it mean?  
and he said, I don't know but it's been authorized.  
the next day when I got up  
they had dogs in the trees  
dead and hanging and dying,  
and I turned to my friend and said,  
what does it mean?  
and he said, don't worry about it,  
it's the way of things, they took a vote,  
it was decided,  
and the next day it was cats,  
I don't see how they caught all those cats so fast  
and hung them in the trees  
but they did,  
and the next day it was horses and that wasn't so good  
because many branches broke,  
and after bacon and eggs the next day  
my friend pulled the pistol on me  
over the coffee and said,  
let's go,  
and we went outside  
and there were all these men and women in the  
trees, most of them dead or  
dying, and he got the rope ready, and I said,  
what does it mean? and he said, don't worry,

it's been authorized, it's constitutional, it passed by majority vote, and he tied my hands behind my back, then opened the noose.

I don't know who's going to hang me, he said, when I get done with you. I suppose, finally, there'll be just one of us left and he'll have to hang himself.

suppose he doesn't? I asked.

he has to, he said, it's been authorized.

o, I said, well, let's get on with it then.

## a great writer

a great writer remains in bed  
shades down  
doesn't want to see anyone  
doesn't want to write anymore  
doesn't want to try anymore;  
the editors and publishers wonder:  
some say he's insane  
some say he's dead;  
his wife now answers all the mail:  
“. . . he does not wish to . . .”  
and some others even walk up and down  
outside his house,  
look at the pulled-down  
shades;  
some even go up and ring the  
bell.  
nobody answers.  
the great writer does not want to be  
disturbed. perhaps the great writer is not  
in? perhaps the great writer has gone  
away?

but they all want to know the truth,  
to hear his voice, to be told some good  
reason for it all.

if he has a reason  
he does not reveal it.  
perhaps there isn't any  
reason?

strange and disturbing arrangements are  
made; his books and paintings are quietly  
auctioned off;  
no new work has appeared now for  
years.

yet his public won't accept his  
silence—  
if he is dead  
they want to know; if he is  
insane they want to know; if he has a  
reason, please tell us!

they walk past his house  
write letters  
ring the bell  
they cannot understand and will not  
accept  
the way things are.

I rather like  
it.

## a gigantic thirst

I've been on antibodies for almost 6 months, baby, to cure a case of TB, man, leave it to an old guy like me to catch such an old-fashioned disease, catch it big as a basketball or like a boa constrictor swallowing a gibbon; so now I'm on antibodies and been told not to drink

or smoke for 6 months, and talk about biting iron with your teeth, I've been drinking and smoking heavily and steadily with the best

and the worst of them for over 50 years, yeah,  
and the most difficult part, pard, I know too many people who  
drink and smoke and they just go right on drinking and smoking in  
front of me like

I'm not aching to crack their skulls and roll them on the floor  
or just chase them the hell away out of my sight—a sight which  
longs *very much* for anything even microscopically addictive.  
the next hardest part is sitting at the typewriter without it,  
I mean, that's been my show, my dance, my entertainment, my  
raison d'être, yep, mixing smoke and booze with the typer and you've  
got a parlay there where the luck rains down night and day and in  
between, and

you hear the phrase “cutting it cold turkey” but I don't think that's  
strong enough, it should be “chopping it cold turkey” or “burying the  
turkey

warm,” anyhow it hasn't been easy, no no no no no no no no no no,  
and when I look at a bottle of beer  
it looks like bottled sunlight, a smoke is like the breath of life  
and a bottle of red wine looks like the blood of life itself.

for me, it's hard to think or worry about the future: the immediate  
present seems too overwhelming and now I sympathize with all those  
    who fail  
to curb their drinking and their smoking  
because these last 6 months have been the longest 6 months of my life!

forgive me for boring you with all this but isn't that why you're  
here?

## eulogies

after death

we exaggerate a person's good qualities,  
inflate them.

during life

we are often repulsed by that same person  
while talking to them on the telephone  
or just being with them in the same room.

and we are often critical of the way they  
walk, talk, dress  
live  
believe

but let them die

then what creatures they  
become.

if only at a funeral service  
somebody would say,  
“what an odious individual  
that one was!”

even at my funeral  
let there be a bit of truth,  
then the good clean  
dirt.

## a residue

stuck in mid-flight,  
wickedly sheared,  
dreaming of the  
dactylozoid.

turned away,  
fashioned to stop  
on zero,  
flamed out,  
hacked at,  
demobilized.

where is common  
laughter?  
simple joy?  
where did they  
go?

what a vanishing  
trick,  
that.

even the skies  
snarl.  
what rancor,  
what  
bitterness . . .

the cry of the  
smothered  
heart,  
now

remembering  
better  
times  
wild and  
wondrous.

now the sad  
grim  
present

cleaves.

## 1990 special

year-worn  
weary to the bone,  
dancing in the dark with the  
dark,  
the Suicide Kid gone  
gray.

ah, the swift summers  
over and gone  
forever!

is that death  
stalking me  
now?

no, it's only my cat,  
this  
time.

## passage

and their ships burned, galleon and galley sail,  
and they drowned as the clouds came down  
like kings from thrones and held them:  
servants, slaves, lions, sages, fools, merchants,  
murderers; then the kelp, bitumen, alabaster, seashells  
held court, and then came the shadows,  
dark as walls under a dying sun: and bellicose and  
vicious the sea pounded the sinking ships and the  
weeds cradled the skulls in disquisition, the  
sea kelp held the skulls up and you saw  
them then, so odd and free and casual: all the  
lonely lovers dead.

## a most dark night in April

each man finally trapped and broken  
each grave ready  
each hawk killed  
and love and luck too.

the poems have ended  
the throat is dry.

I suppose there's no funeral for this  
and no tears  
and no reason.

pain's the master  
pain is silent.

the throats of my poems  
are dry.

## **sun coming down**

no one is sorry I am leaving,  
not even I;  
but there should be a minstrel  
or at least a glass of wine.

it bothers the young most, I think:  
an unviolent slow death.  
still it makes any man dream;  
you wish for an old sailing ship,  
the white salt-crusted sail  
and the sea shaking out hints of immortality.

sea in the nose  
sea in the hair  
sea in the marrow, in the eyes  
and yes, there in the chest.  
will we miss  
the love of a woman or music or food  
or the gambol of the great mad muscled  
horse, kicking clods and destinies  
high and away  
in just one moment of the sun coming down?

but now it's my turn  
and there's no majesty in it  
because there was no majesty  
before it  
and each of us, like worms bitten  
out of apples,  
deserves no reprieve.

death enters my mouth  
and snakes along my teeth  
and I wonder if I am frightened of  
this voiceless, unsorrowful dying that is  
like the drying of a rose?

## About the Author

**CHARLES BUKOWSKI** is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944, when he was twenty-four, and began writing poetry when he was thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three.

During his lifetime he published over forty-five books of poetry and prose—many translated into more than a dozen languages. His worldwide popularity remains undiminished, and Ecco is proud to publish the five posthumous collections of his work (this volume is the fifth and final) in addition to a new selection of his later works, *The Pleasures of the Damned*.

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